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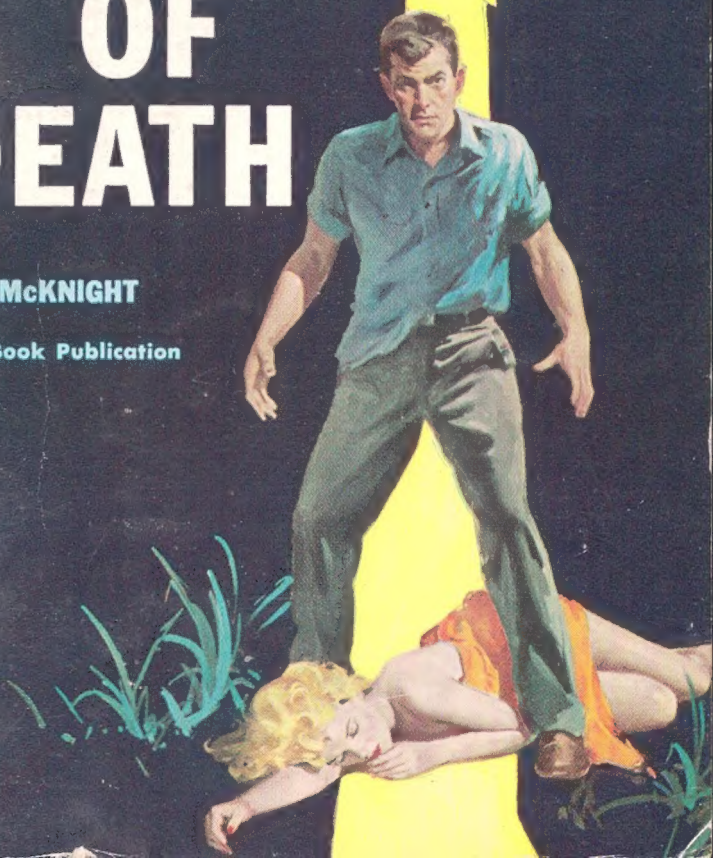
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Never Short-Change The Coroner

A SLICE OF DEATH

BOB McKNIGHT

First Book Publication



THE "TAKE" IN CORPSES

Mack Gaul, trouble shooter for a big Florida race track, really got the odds against him one day. A gorgeous redheaded co-ed who carried a slide rule along with her lipstick gave him the word that the track's totalisator board was cheating the public.

When Gaul went to investigate, things started to pop! The tote-board man's skull, for one . . .

With that dead man on the scene with Gaul, who shows up? Why, the police. It seems the tote operator had just called them to complain that Gaul had threatened to kill him!

So that trouble shooter was on the spot, with murder trouble all around him. The police wanted to convict him of it, and certain other parties were putting heavy bets on their making it stick . . .

**Turn this book over for
second complete novel**

BOB McKNIGHT, now in his fifties and living in St. Petersburg, Florida, describes himself as an ex-mining engineer, an extranport pilot, a collector of old hand guns, and a "semi-retired hoss player." As readers of Ace Books know, he is also a good hand at writing fast-paced novels.

McKnight, who has drawn on his personal experiences for previous novel backgrounds, drew on his track knowledge for A SLICE OF DEATH. His hard-cover book on picking the odds, entitled *Straight, Place and Showdown*, has been selling steadily for seven years. He adds, "Besides this, I have had published over three hundred turf articles. My byline is well known to turf fans throughout this country and Canada. I have been described by the editors of *American Turf Monthly* as one of the top handicappers of the day."

Bob McKnight Ace novels in print include: DOWNWIND (D-217), MURDER MUTUEL (D-279), THE BIKINI BOMBSHELL (D-387), and SWAMP SANCTUARY (D-411).

A SLICE OF DEATH

by

BOB McKNIGHT

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OPEN SEASON

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CHAPTER 1

IT WAS the kind of mid-season Florida day in which trouble should have had no part.

Temperatures were in the high seventies. Bright sunlight caressed blazing yellow hibiscus, and red bouganvillea, and filtered lazily through the riotous purple blossoms of the royal poinciana trees.

Even the blended hum of the multitudinous voices re-running the last race, some damning the losing jockey, others praising the winning one, sounded lazy and peaceful.

Winter Downs, a horse plant at its lovable best.

I wasn't fooled by the between-races languor. Even now, I could feel the conflict pulsing beneath the phony restfulness. It was always there, sometimes quietly threatening, sometimes bursting into violence.

Trouble was my job. Only the degree varied.

Handling a huge, excitable crowd, the temper of which was as inconsistent as some of the hides running here, could be a one-way ticket to the cackle hatch.

For relaxation, I dreamed of the day when I'd turn in my ulcers and inhabit a remote Pacific isle where, when I got hungry, I could make faces at the monkeys and they'd throw coconuts down at me.

"Mack Gaul. Report to your office. Mr. Gaul. Office." It was the P.A. bawling at me raucously.

It startled me, grated against my daydream. I should have been used to it. I heard it often enough. It always meant trouble.

For no good reason, unless it's an instinct you acquire after long exposure to this kind of job, I felt something ominous behind this particular P.A. summons.

I pushed my way through the crowd, headed for the of-

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fices high up in the stands. I glanced over my shoulder at the tote board. Its lighted figures stared back at me impersonally from the park-like infield.

We'd been having trouble with the lights out there lately. All seemed in order now.

At my office, I found a luscious, toothsome honey waiting impatiently for me.

This was trouble? Not in my book. Anyhow, it was the kind of trouble I enjoyed coping with.

Auburn hair and lashes. Green eyes that said "go." A few freckles sprinkled over the bridge of a small nose. They don't wrap trouble in this kind of package. Or do they?

She eyed me, not impersonally.

"Big man!", she said. She said it softly, but she was hurling a challenge. "With shoulders like that, I'll bet you have to go through doors sideways."

I looked at her shoulders . . . and environs. Soft and sun-tanned. No sleeves or even straps to hide the view. The off-the-shoulders dress was white, and the things it did for her were something scandalous.

Hell, a burlap sack would have done the same. If she had any more curves, she'd be banned.

I stared. She caught me at it—devouring her, top to bottom.

She smiled. It was a nice smile.

"Are you the manager?", she asked.

I smiled back at her. "When the boss wants to be condescending, which isn't often," I said, "he refers to me as his assistant. Actually, I'm the trouble shooter. What's your problem?"

"You're Mr. Gaul?"

"The name's Mack," I said. "Mack Gaul."

"I'm Sue Farmer, Mr. Gaul."

"Mack."

"All right, Mack," she said. "It's about the Totalisator."

"What about the tote?"

"It's cheating."

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"Now, I've heard everything," I said.

"It's true. The win payoff in the first race was forty cents below what it should have been."

"Look, honey—Sue—Miss Farmer," I said, "that electronic monster knows more mathematical answers than you and I put together, with Einstein at the crest of his career thrown in. How would you know if it was cheating?"

She hauled a slide rule out of her purse and waved it under my nose.

"Because I worked it out the hard way," she said. "Total win pool, less fifteen percent 'take,' less purchase value of winning tickets, divided by the equivalent number of two-dollar tickets outstanding, gives three dollars and forty-three cents. Less breakage, leaves three dollars and forty cents. Plus the two dollars originally bet makes the correct payoff five dollars and forty cents. The totalisator board shows an even five dollars."

I was stunned. I was breathless. Beauty *and* brains. Dynamite.

I grabbed the slipstick out of her hand, thought better of it, and handed it back. I went and got my own out of the desk drawer.

I moved over to the windows where I could see the tote board clearly. I ran off the series myself.

She was right. Something was catawampus with the Mutuel Monster.

And if Joe Public, the two buck improver of the breed, discovered he'd been shortchanged twenty cents on the dollar, I'd have the kind of trouble that shouldn't happen to a dog.

What's a mere forty cents on a two buck investment? That isn't the way the horse fan figures. It wasn't the way I was figuring, and I didn't need the slide rule, either. Forty cents times thirty-two hundred winning tickets equals twelve hundred dollars. In one race. If it continued, uncorrected, for the nine races, it would add up to over ten grand in one afternoon.

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"What are you going to do?" Sue Farmer asked.

A good question. I was asking myself the same thing. Only it was all mixed up in higher mathematics. Like what it would mean for the balance of the meeting. Forty more afternoons of this, at ten grand per, would be over four hundred thousand dollars. And when you figure that book makers do a seven billion dollar business away from the track . . . I was getting dizzy.

"You understand about mob psychology, gorgeous?" I said.

"I'm a psychology major at the university," she said.

"And you had to pick today to play hookey?"

"I'm not playing hookey. I'm working on my thesis for graduation."

"You're going to graduate without my presence," I said.

"When the irate horse players get through with me—"

"Then you will give them their forty cents back?"

"Can't, it's too late."

She looked at me like she'd discovered a crook in the family. "Hah!" she said.

"Yeah, hah." I started for the door. "Come with me. You've got some things to learn they don't teach in universities."

"Mmmmm," she said. "Where do we go?"

"To the parimutuel rooms," I said.

"Oh," she said. "Oh, that?" She looked disappointed.

"Couldn't you telephone?"

"Telephones have ears," I said. "If this should leak out in the wrong places, I'm cooked."

She tagged along. After all, she started this. She decided she ought to be in on the kill—mine!

I led her down to the main floor, conscious of the envious male stares. I steered her around to the long line of cashiers' windows.

"You see what I mean?" I said. The place was deserted except for one lone dowager collecting a two buck Show ticket.

"They flock in here for the pay-off as soon as the race is

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over," I said. "Nobody here means the winners have already collected."

"At five dollars," Sue said.

I nodded.

"You owe each of them forty cents."

"Who?" I said. "There's nothing quite so anonymous as a parimutuel pasteboard once it's left your sweaty little fist. Or maybe you think you could point out the ones we owe the forty cents to?"

She said nothing.

"I'm glad we understand each other," I said. "I wish it was as simple as redistributing the wealth. It would get me off the hook. So I've got to do the next best thing."

"Like what?"

"Like trying to find out what happened, and fixing it so it won't happen again."

"What about the forty cents?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'll think of something—I hope."

"You're going to keep them," she accused. "That's dishonest. You want to be a crook?"

I groaned. "I wish I'd forgotten to come to work today," I said. "I don't want the forty cents. Sometimes things just get thrust on you."

A minute later we were admitted to the area between the betting stalls and the cashiers' windows.

The place swarmed with men, busy men, but not too busy to stop what they were doing to ogle Sue.

She smiled at them all. "Hello boys," she said. They didn't know I was there.

That was all right with me. At a time like this, being ignored has certain advantages. I didn't want to talk to anyone, just yet, but Harry Grant, the parimutuel boss.

I zeroed in on him and tugged Sue along with me.

Harry was a smallish guy with a slow smile and a quick mind. He watched me approach, read me every step of the way.

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"Walk away from me, Mack," he said. He looked at Sue. "You can stay."

Sue looked at Harry, then at me. "He's cute, isn't he?" she said.

"Yeah. Sure. Write him up in your thesis."

"I'd rather be written up in her diary," he said. "In invisible ink."

"Sue Farmer," I said. "Harry Grant."

"Hi, toots," Harry said. "I don't approve of the company you keep."

"Sometimes things just get thrust on you," Sue said.

"Look," I said, "this is serious."

He wasn't looking at me, but he was listening.

"Your totalisator is haywire," I said. I briefed him.

"Let's look at the tapes," he said.

The tapes were okay. The payoff had been figured correctly.

We checked with the relay man who had given the prices to the operator out on the tote board. He ridiculed the idea that he might have given the operator the wrong win payoff, and produced his tape to prove it.

"My totalisator is all right," Harry said. "The error occurred on the board."

"I'll go check," I said. "I don't have to tell you this must be kept quiet."

We got out of there, Sue kind of running beside me to keep up with my long strides.

We went out onto the track from the paddock chute, crossed it and ducked under the inside rail. A path in the close cropped lawn led to the door in the tote board. I shoved it open, handed Sue through.

We entered a long, high, narrow enclosure, one wall of which was a mass of electric wiring. This was the backside of the tote face. Along it was a catwalk for the operator.

The operator was a pudgy character in his fifties, with watery eyes, and blue veins in his nose. His name was Bill Vargas. Obviously he spent too much of his salary on the

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grape, but he was steady on the job and a devout union man.

His surly disposition didn't matter too much because he worked out here all alone.

"You got an error on your board, Vargas," I said.

The look he gave me should have stuck four inches out of my back. He spit a stream of tobacco juice that arched from the catwalk onto the messy concrete floor.

"My board's right," he said in an alky basso. "Besides, there's a telephone. You didn't have to come out."

I looked at my shoe, then up at him. I didn't say anything for a minute.

"What win price did you get from relay on that number two horse?" I said.

"Fi' dollars," he said.

"Let's see your tape," I said. "It should have read five-forty."

"So, he fed it to me wrong," Vargas said. "Get off my back."

"Let's look at the tape."

"There ain't no tape. My teletype's on the bum. He fed me them prices over the phone.

Sue Farmer stood quietly. She was studying him, putting her psychology to work.

Harry's relay man hadn't said he'd given the prices over the phone. He hadn't mentioned that Vargas's end of the teletype was inoperative. I wondered why.

As it stood, either man might have been in error. There was no way I could pin it down.

"Watch it, will you, Vargas?" I said. "It's too late to change it now, but that forty cent error amounts to twelve hundred bucks."

"I'm cryin'," Vargas said. "Twelve hundred extra bucks from the suckers and you're beefin'."

"Just make sure you're right," I said. "And get your teletype fixed."

"Yah," Vargas said. "Instead of ridin' me you oughta

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split them twelve yards with me so I won't be tempted to tell nobody how Winter Downs is fleecin' the suckers outa an extra bite."

I wanted to kick his teeth down his throat. But he had me. He knew he had me. I couldn't even get him fired.

To make it final, he blacked out his board and put up the morning line for the second race.

CHAPTER 2

I SLAMMED the door to the tote board behind us and followed Sue Farmer along the path toward the grandstands.

Even in my evil mood, she was a tantalizing sight. Good legs. A tiny waist and neatly flaring hips. Her walk reminded me of steel guitars, exotic tropic isles, and getting drunk on sun-warmed sand.

"He was lying, of course," Sue said.

"How do you know?"

"A trained psychologist can tell when a person's lying."

"Would it show if I were to lie to you?"

"Yes."

"I'll bear it in mind," I said. "But don't let his surly attitude fool you. He's always like that."

"I know," Sue said. "He's an employer hater and a dipso. Subconsciously he detests himself. The employer is his whipping boy."

"That doesn't make sense," I said. "He's paid a fabulous salary, and his hours and working conditions are ideal. Why should he hate his employer?"

"His type believes the union propaganda, that the employer would be running a sweat shop if not forced to toe the line by the union. His type feels indebted to the union for his pay, not to the employer."

"Assuming you're right," I said, "what was he lying about?"

"About the relay man giving him the wrong figure."

"Oh. A human trait—trying to blame others for our own errors," I said.

"I mean he knew he'd put up the wrong price," Sue said. "It wasn't a boo-boo. It was planned."

"And jammed his teletype to have an excuse?"

"In all probability."

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"Why?"

"That's your department," Sue said.

"I'll give it some thought," I said.

"Boots and Saddles" sounded as we crossed the track, summoning the horses to parade for the second race.

If Sue was right about Vargas, and I had got the same impression, what possible reason could he have for doing it? Was he so mixed up in his mind that he could believe we'd condone such a thing and split with him?

It was fantastic. I couldn't buy it. There had to be something else behind it.

As we reached my office, Sue said, "I wonder if he'll try it again in this race?"

"If he does, I'll twist his goddam neck," I said.

"You can't," Sue said. "You've maneuvered yourself into a corner by not giving the forty cents back while there was still time."

"There never was time," I said, "after those winning tickets had been cashed. What do you think would have happened if I'd got on the P.A. as soon as I—you—discovered it? Suppose I'd told them to go back to the cashiers and pick up another forty cents?"

"All right," Sue said. "I'm supposing."

"So every larcenous bastard out there would have had his mits in the damper. And there would be some that would line up again, and again. It would have caused a riot. They'd pick us clean, and call us crooks while they did it, for getting the payoff screwed up in the first place. They'd get to wondering how many times it had happened before that we hadn't told them about, or attempted to make restitution for."

"You don't think much of the people who support racing," Sue said.

"I love them," I said. "Every larcenous one of them. But I don't let them fool me. Go out there in the crowd, pass the word, quietly, that you've got a fix going, that you've bought off all the jockeys but one to pull their mounts.

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That number five will be the winner at a fabulous payoff. Even the honest ones will break a leg getting to the betting windows to buy in on your crooked deal."

"How cynical."

"It's true. And the same ones will be the first to blow the whistle, or write their Congressmen, if the stewards don't decide a photo finish in their favor."

"Then what would they do if they knew you had deliberately withheld their forty cents?"

"They'd tear me limb from limb," I said.

"Don't you think Vargas knows that?" Sue said.

I sucked in a great gulp of the suddenly stuffy atmosphere.

I knew what I had to do. I didn't like it, but I had to check with the boss.

I knew what he'd say. "What are you telling *me* about it for? *Fix* it!" I also knew what he'd say if I didn't check it with him. Yeah. "You're fired."

"If I'm not back in five minutes," I told Sue, "tell the homicide boys I went down giving my all for dear old Winter Downs."

"Where are you going?"

"To see the boss."

With one last look at her silhouette, I went down the short hall to the boss's offices.

The outer sanctum was presided over by the brown-eyed blonde who had invented cleavage. She wore a white blouse over her enchanting torso, with a plunging "V", to prove it. And the tan skirt, when I finally got around to looking at the skirt, looked like it had been melted on.

Her name was Anne Skelly. She was J. Worthington Badger's "no" girl. She said "no" to everyone but J. Worthington.

By way of building up my own lowering ego, I tried to recall if she had ever said "no" to me. She hadn't. There was a reason for this. J. Worthington Badger annihilated anyone

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caught moving in on his private stuff. I had simply made sure he had no reason to annihilate me.

I had considered it, all right, but thus far had been able to suffer out the temptation in silence.

"Hullo, lover," Anne said.

Along with cleavage she had also invented the bedroom voice and the come-and-get-it attitude. She employed all these delectable qualities freely—when J. Worthington wasn't around.

She was using them freely now.

"Well—uh— isn't the boss here?" I said

"No," Anne said. "Come on in."

"But he's around?"

"Mmmmm. You could come in and wait."

"Well, how soon you expecting him back?"

"A couple of hours," Anne said.

I shuddered. The way things were going, two hours could be an eternity. "You know where to reach him?"

She shrugged. With Anne, just shrugging is a ceremony. "I could try," she said. "It would be more fun just waiting for him."

"Yeah, I'm sure," I said. "But this is urgent."

"Come sit by Anne while I try to locate him."

"Can't, gorgeous," I said, "too many things to do. Try my office or put me on the P.A. when you find him."

"What's so urgent, lover?"

I ducked out without answering. It wasn't that I didn't trust Anne. But I didn't want her yakking to J. Worthington about it over the phone.

Three hundred and sixty-five afternoons in a year, and he had to pick this one to be gone.

I was about to turn into my own office when I had a thought. I went on past and raced down to the cashier area again.

The din from the crowd told me the horses were turning into the stretch for the run to the wire.

I stopped at the first win cashier I came to.

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"Let's see your sheet on the first race," I said.

He showed it to me. Number two was listed as five dollars even, all right.

"You get a change on this from five-forty?" I asked.

"Nope," the cashier said. "No change. Came through like you see it."

"Thanks."

I walked away deep in thought. The relay had to be in on this thing with Vargas. Otherwise, relay would have given the cashiers the correct figure even though he, or Vargas, had fumbled the tote board figure. I couldn't believe Vargas was faultless, not after the way he'd acted. Sue and I were both sure he knew the price had been juggled.

How many more were in on it? How long had it been going on undetected? How much did Harry Grant know? He'd shown me tapes with everything in order. Yet the price on the board had been wrong and the payoff given the mutuel cashiers had been wrong.

Either Harry, or the relay man, or both, had to have a deal with Vargas in order to coordinate the tote board with the cashiers' payoff sheets.

What I couldn't figure out was why Vargas had to be brought in on the thing at all. If it was a mutuel room manipulation, why cut Vargas in? He would have no way of knowing if the prices given him were right. His job was to put up what was fed him.

Could Sue and I both have been wrong in suspecting Vargas?

I was mad. I was boiling, seething. I wanted to barge right into the mutuel rooms and start taking things apart.

I counted up to ten, and got hold of myself. The relay man, and Vargas, and Harry, already knew I had the scent of something. Maybe it would be enough to make them knock it off. That was my job, find the error and stop it. And I had to stop the thing without bad publicity. I knew that was the way J. Worthington Badger would want it. He wouldn't want me to make like a prosecutor.

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I detoured around the mutuel rooms and went back to my office.

Sue Farmer was still there. She stood at the windows, slipstick in hand, waiting for the payoffs on the second race.

"Number seven won it," Sue said. "He went off at twenty-seven to one. He should pay fifty-six eighty according to my figuring."

"It will probably be all right this time," I said. "They know I'll be watching."

"They?"

"Yeah, they," I said. "The relay man had to be in on it. Vargas is in on it. And probably your cute new boy friend, Harry Grant, is in on it."

"How do you know?"

"It figures," I said. I explained the angle I'd just checked out.

"It gets complicated, doesn't it?" she said.

"I'm just hoping they'll knock it off now that they know I smell something fishy."

"If they do, will you let them get away with what they've already done?"

"It's up to the boss," I said. "Personally, I'd like to crack a few heads together and throw them out on their behinds."

"But you can't, is that it?"

"That's what's the matter," I said.

"But if they're left in their jobs, won't they try again when they think you've relaxed?"

"Whoever heard of relaxing in a job like this?"

The prices went up on the tote board, followed by the "Official" sign.

"Well, you've scared them honest," Sue said.

"Maybe," I said. I was busy with the slide rule. The win price on the longshot was right. I could have let it go at that, but I was suspicious.

The second choice in the betting had run second. The

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favorite had run third. I checked out the place and show payoffs on the second horse and the show money on the third place horse.

"What are you doing?" Sue said.

"Those guys haven't got religion," I said. "All they've done is move their mits into the place and show dampers."

Sue looked confused. "I don't get it," she said.

"The prices are right for the winner, all the way across the board. But the place price on the second horse is light, and so is the show price. Also the show price on the favorite."

"Oh, golly. I didn't think of checking those," she said. "How smart you are."

"I just couldn't see those crooks giving up so easily," I said.

"There's still something I don't understand," Sue said.

"The tapes in the first race were all right. How could anyone profit? I mean, the bookkeeping will show the twelve hundred overage, won't it?"

"It should, unless bookkeeping is in on it, and is doctoring the books.

"Then somebody's being dishonest for nothing."

"There's got to be a mit in the damper somewhere," I said. "First I have to get those prices on the board corrected."

I picked up the phone and got through to Vargas on the tote board. But he took his own time answering.

"Yeah," he said, finally.

"How stupid do you think I am, Vargas?" I said.

"I ain't got all day," Vargas said. "Let's just say I figure your I.Q. at about two—maybe three if you crowd the facts a little."

"Vargas!"

"Yeah?"

"I'll give you one minute to get the correct prices up on that Board."

"What's wrong with them prices?"

"Stop stalling," I said. "You've got forty-five seconds."

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"And then what?"

"I'll blow the whistle."

"Even you ain't that stupid."

"You've got thirty-five seconds, Vargas."

I was running a bluff, of course.

"Even if them prices was wrong," Vargas said, "I couldn't change them on your say so. I'd have to clear with relay."

"Then clear with relay, and damned fast," I said. "And Vargas!"

"Yeah?"

"I'll be watching the board for those changes."

"I suppose you ain't got nothing better to do," he said.

"Get with it. I'm warning you."

I hung up. I left the desk to go stand by Sue at the window.

We both stared at the tote board.

The phone rang. I raced over and grabbed it out of its cradle.

"Mack Gaul," I said.

"Hullo, lover."

"Oh, it's you Anne," I said. "You find the boss?"

"I've called all his favorite bars," she said, "and all his favorite blondes, brunettes and redheads. No boss."

"He's got to be somewhere," I said. "Maybe he's on legitimate business."

"You're kidding," Anne said. "J. Worthy only attends to business in the morning."

"Look, beautiful," I said, "what I got hold of can't wait till morning."

"What *have* you got hold of, lover?"

"Annel"

"Yes, lover?"

"Keep trying."

"I will, love. I will."

I hung up and rejoined Sue at the windows.

The tote board hadn't been changed. I stared in disbelief. It stared back at me insolently.

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"What are you going to do?" Sue said.

"I'm going out of my mind, and leave no forwarding address."

"Vargas must be very sure of himself," she said.

"Yeah," I said. "There's got to be more behind this than just a dipso with a brainstorm."

I waited one more minute. No change. I raced back to the phone. Called the mutuel rooms this time.

When I got a connection, I said, "Mack Gaul here. Put Harry Grant on."

"I'll see if he's here," a male voice said.

I hung on, drumming my fingers on the desk top. I waited. I got up and scowled at the tote board. I sat down again and drummed some more. Finally, the same voice came back.

"Harry isn't here right now. Anybody else do?"

"Give me relay."

"Hal's taking a coffee break."

"Doesn't anybody work there between races?"

"Only me."

"Who're you?"

"Jerry, the chalk boy."

"Remind me to get you promoted to general manager or something."

"Yes, sir," Jerry said. "I sure will."

I slammed the phone down and sat there muttering obscenities. They'd maneuvered me into a corner again. As soon as Vargas had called, Harry and Hal, the relay, had ducked out. By the time they made themselves available again, it would be too late to do anything about correcting the prices. The tickets would all be cashed.

I looked at my watch. Hell, it was too late already. At least half would have been paid off by now.

My future didn't look rosy. In two races—that I knew of—the prices had been manipulated, and the two buck fan screwed out of part of his just return.

Yeah. I knew about it, and I hadn't done anything

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about it. I was guilty as hell—as guilty as the guys in on the actual manipulation. I could guess who they were, but I couldn't prove a thing. Now I knew how the innocent bystander feels when he gets shot, and then gets arrested for being in the way.

' I was hamstrung. There wasn't anything I could do. Yet I had to do something.

CHAPTER 3

"You DON'T look happy," Sue said.

"The understatement of the season," I said.

"You've got to do something," she said. "You can't just sit there mooning and let them get away with it."

"Yeah, I know."

"Well?"

"You got me into this," I said. "I got a good notion to call the prexy at the university and tip him off that you're frittering your time away at a race track."

"You wouldn't!"

"The hell I wouldn't. I'm desperate."

"Then do something constructive."

"Like what, for instance?"

"You're the trouble shooter."

"I could resign," I said "I could go home and get saturated with whiskey."

"That the best idea you got?"

"It's the *only* one I've got."

"You can't," Sue informed me. "You're not the type."

"Well, if I was the type that's what I'd do."

"You're stalling."

"Quiet," I said. "I'm thinking."

It wasn't much of an idea I had.

I picked up the phone and got through to the tote board. I heard the receiver being lifted but there was no answer.

"Vargas!" I yelled into the mouthpiece.

"Shaddap," Vargas said.

"You figure you got me stymied, eh Vargas?" I said.

"You think you got me sewed up?"

"In your slow-witted way, you're beginning to catch on."

A SLICE OF DEATH

"You're making me mad, Vargas," I said. "When I get mad, I'm sometimes violent."

"Yeah? Think of that!"

"And after I beat you to a bloody pulp, I'll take over the operation of the tote myself."

"You come out here and try to take over this Board, and I file a grievance with the union. They'll strike this lousy horse factory. Then where will you be?"

"I'm glad you mentioned that, Vargas," I said. "As long as you don't mind the operation being shut down—and your nice fat, fast bucks being suddenly cut off—I might as well let the cops clean it up while it's down. You follow me, Vargas?"

"I ain't scared."

"You better get scared, Vargas, because that's what I'm going to do."

"I'll tell 'em you masterminded the deal."

"You do that, Vargas. I'm already resigned to making the ultimate sacrifice for dear old Winter Downs. I'm willing to be the martyr just so you and your crowd are caught up in the dragnet."

"Damned if I don't believe you're nutty enough to do it," Vargas said.

"I am . . . that is to say, I will, Vargas. Well, goodbye. I'll see you in the mug book."

"Wait up," Vargas said. "Let's not be hasty."

"Too late, Vargas. I'm going to blow the whistle. It's the only way."

"Nix," he said. "I'll see if I can get you cut in for a piece."

"You can't buy me off, Vargas. And I hope they make us cell mates so I can rock you to sleep every night—if I can find a rock."

I looked at Sue. Her lovely mouth was open and she looked scared. She didn't want me languishing in the bastille.

A SLICE OF DEATH

"Look," Vargas said. "I'll even take back what I said about your I.Q."

"There's only one deal I'll make with you, Vargas," I said. "Cease and desist."

"Hold the whistle," he said. "I'll contact the summit. I'll call you back as soon as I get a high level directive."

"On one condition, Vargas. No more price finagling during this uneasy truce."

"Awri'. Awri," he said.

"Vargas."

"Yeah?"

"You weasel out on me and I'll personally break your god-dam neck."

"Yeah. Sure."

I hung up and grinned at Sue.

"Now what?" she said.

"We wait. Vargas is calling a summit conference to deliver my ultimatum."

"Who's the summit?"

"He didn't say. It could be Harry Grant."

"What if somebody outside is pulling the strings?"

"Who outside?"

"I don't know. Maybe somebody with something on Vargas. Something big enough so they can force him to do what they say."

"You been listening to too many soap operas."

She swayed her superlative equipment away from the windows and toward me where I still sat at the desk. My blood pressure began to skyrocket.

"What if it's gangsters?" Sue said. "They might want to shoot you for interfering."

"I'm agin' it," I said.

"And if they refuse to cease and desist, then you'll have to go through with your threat, and you'll go to jail."

"Discouraging, isn't it?"

"I don't see how you can win, no matter which way it goes. You either get shot or go to jail."

A SLICE OF DEATH

"We could go to my place and get half shot."

"You'd better think of something," Sue said.

"I am."

"You're a licentious old man."

"I'm only twenty-seven."

"Maybe I won't be working on my thesis tonight."

"Now, we're getting someplace."

"Maybe by tonight you'll be shot or in jail."

She was close to the desk now. I got up and she walked right into my arms.

Her full lips were moist and sweet. Her incredible body was soft and warm and fragrant and the way it was pressed against me made me forget all about Vargas and tote boards and troubles. In fact, when it comes to a situation of this kind, I've got a one track mind.

I didn't even hear Anne come into my office.

"Oh, lover!" she said.

"Lover?" Sue said.

"Ho, ho," I said. "A joke. Anne's a great kidder. I can explain everything."

"Who is this amateur?" Anne said.

"Who is this phony blonde?" Sue said.

They sneered at each other for a long moment then quit the battlefield in unison, Anne flouncing back to her reception room, and Sue flouncing out into the crowd, presumably heading back to the university.

Some days a guy just can't win.

A glum half hour passed during which the only notable thing that happened was the running of the third race. And no monkey business on the tote board afterward.

I took what satisfaction I could from this. At least Vargas was keeping that part of the deal.

The horses were parading for the fourth race when the phone finally rang. There was nothing cherry about the sound.

I snaked the instrument out of its cradle.

"Mack Gaul here," I said.

A SLICE OF DEATH

"I got news for you," Vargas said. He sounded worried, Maybe even a little scared. "You better come out. This can't be discussed over the phone."

"Why not?" I said. "I told you how it had to be. What's the answer? Yes, or no?"

"It ain't that simple," Vargas said.

"So, I blow the whistle."

"Nix. Not till you hear what I got for you."

"What *have* you got for me, Vargas?"

"Names. A while ago you wanted names."

"A while ago you couldn't remember any names."

"It's different now," Vargas said. "But you gotta protect me. For the names, the "m.o.", the works, I gotta have immunity."

This wasn't exactly the way I wanted it. I wanted the deal killed without any cops or any publicity. Vargas hadn't been able to sell this to the summit. So he was ready to sell out.

Maybe it was the best deal I could get. And if there was a stink, maybe I could play it up as how we protected our audience from the machinations of the fast buck artists. With Vargas's information, I could clear myself.

"All right," I said. "I'll be there in about five minutes."

I could hear his phone clatter against the stand as he tried to hang up. The guy sure was nervous. Maybe he had reason to be scared.

Things weren't going the way I wanted. I wasn't getting the breaks. So, all right. Sometimes a guy just has to make his own breaks.

Anne had messed up one of my deals, so before going to the tote board, I marched down the hall to the boss's outer office with my chin stuck out and a steadfastness of purpose.

I rammed right into the reception office. Anne barely looked up as I swooped down on her.

"Oh, it's you!" she said.

I walked right up beside her, lifted her chin with my hand

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and smothered her lips with mine. She didn't respond for a long time, maybe a fifth of a second. Then she turned on the current. She took hold of my hand that held her chin and moved it down to where I could discover for myself—as if there had been any doubt in my mind—that the lovely mounds with which she had invented cleavage were real.

I left her as quickly as I'd arrived. As I went through the door, I turned slightly toward her. She was flushed and utterly beautiful.

"I'll settle with you tonight," I said.

I went on through the door and set a course for the tote board.

On the apron in front of the grandstand I ran into Artie Finch. He's got a build like a heavyweight, but with a round, guileless baby face and pink cheeks. Artie's a tout, but with an established clientele which he tries to treat right. Which is why I let him operate at Winter Downs. In exchange, he keeps his eyes and ears open and passes along bits that are helpful in my job.

"Anything new, Artie?" I said.

"The lipstick," Artie said, "is not becoming."

I rubbed it off as I headed for the tote board.

As I walked along the path to the tote board door, I had the strange feeling that thousands of pairs of eyes were boring into the back of my neck.

When I reached the door I shoved it open and let it bang against the inner wall. My chin was thrust forward, and I was carrying a big chip on my shoulder. I had taken all the run-around from Bill Vargas I intended to take. If he tried any more fencing with me, I'd spatter his brains from here to infinity.

I had one foot inside the enclosure when I froze. My stomach balled up into a hard knot and raced up into my throat. I couldn't swallow it.

I couldn't even get my mouth closed.

CHAPTER 4

I'D SEEN SUDDEN death before. Like the old duffer who had tagged a longshot and his ticker couldn't take the shock. And I'd seen a head-on collision once that had been very ghastly.

This was the first time I'd come face to face with cold-blooded murder.

I finally became unfrozen enough to go in, and closed the door behind me as though those thousands of pairs of eyes were about to follow me inside.

I stood there staring, my back pushed hard against the door. My breathing was labored, as if I'd run all the way over here, and I felt like I was going to be sick.

I moved forward on leaden feet, not that I needed a closer look to know Bill Vargas was dead. Nobody lives with his skull parted all the way down the middle, and with what seemed like gallons of blood on the concrete floor.

I'd rather have taken a beating than touch this bloody mess that was Vargas, but my first obligation was to Winter Downs. Yeah, I knew what police orders would be. Don't touch anything.

Supposing Vargas had documentary evidence on his person with which to back up the names, and m.o. he'd promised me?

I went through his pockets, the sweat pouring off me like I was engaged in heavy labor. In my hurried frenzy, I got my hands smeared with blood. A swell time for somebody to come walking in.

I wanted out of there like I'd never wanted anything in my life. But I had to make sure. I had the goofy idea that the murder would put an end to the price manipulation. I didn't want to leave anything that would start the inevitable police investigation in that direction.

A SLICE OF DEATH

If there had been anything like that, the murderer had removed it.

Now I had to call the police. Murder was something even I wouldn't dare cover up for dear old Winter Downs.

I wiped the blood off my hands on a pair of dirty coveralls hanging from the catwalk. Then I reached for the phone.

It rang just as my hand touched it and I damn near did a backflip. When I recovered my senses, my first reaction was not to answer. I was thinking as if I were guilty of the murder myself. What did it matter who knew I was there? I'd been about to phone the police and tell them I'd found the body.

Maybe this was relay, or Harry Grant, or one of the summit guys Vargas had talked about. Maybe if they thought it was Vargas answering they might let something slip I could use.

I didn't have to try to imitate Vargas' raspy basso. My stomach was still knotted in my throat, and if I didn't sound exactly like Vargas, I didn't sound like Mack Gaul either.

I lifted the phone like it was alive and about to bite me.

"Yeah," I said.

"Vargas, is Mack Gaul there?"

It was Anne's voice.

I cleared my throat. "This is Mack, Anne," I said. Somehow I wasn't in the mood for the light treatment.

"Mack," Anne said. She sounded agitated. "Did you call the police?"

"No," I said. "I was just going—" I looked at Vargas. How could she know about him? I just found him. "Why the hell would I call the police?"

"Well, they're swarming through the main gate. What's going on, anyway?"

Now I was really scared, though I didn't quite know why. It was just that cops and murder kind of go together. No, it was something more than that. Call it a trouble shooter's intuition, if you will, but I had a deep seated and very

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sudden conviction that somebody was maneuvering me again.

"I hope it isn't what I think it is," I said.

I slammed the phone down and raced for the door. It took maybe one full second for me to get there. It was the longest second I'd ever lived. But my mind was racing. I was thinking Vargas had been unduly insistent that I come to the tote board to talk to him. He had sounded worried. Scared. Could his murderer have been there then? If so, why hadn't he told me? Why hadn't he hollered for help?

I yanked the door open and looked toward the stands. The cops were already swarming across the track towards me.

Something told me to run. It was crazy. Why should I run? I'd been about to call the cops like a good trouble shooter and a good citizen, hadn't I? Then why should I be so scared now that they were here?

I was feeling like a murderer getting caught with the smoking gun in his hand. Hell, I hadn't killed the guy. Maybe somebody else had found him before I got there and called the police.

That seemed the sensible explanation. Trouble was I just didn't believe it. I wished I was someplace else. Anyplace else. Like buried deep in that milling crowd on the apron. The cops were already between me and the crowd.

I thought of running in the other direction, toward the stables. There were places I could hide along Shed Row.

It was a long way across the open infield to the stables. Even if I could outrun the cops, I sure as hell couldn't outrun bullets. And cops have an uncomfortable habit of shooting at guys that run.

There was nothing to do but wait.

Still thinking like a guilty man, I had another thought. My finger prints were on Vargas's telephone. I tried to tell myself it didn't mean a thing. I had been about to call the police when I'd answered Anne's call. What was there incriminating about that?

A SLICE OF DEATH

Nothing, of course, except my feeling that someone had maneuvered me; that somebody was way ahead of me.

Just then something else occurred to me. I should have made that call to the cops regardless. Now, it was going to be kind of clumsy to explain why I hadn't. I wasn't going to show up in the best light when those cops came through the door and found me alone with a murdered man.

The phone rang. I answered it.

"I saw you go out to the tote board a couple of minutes ago. Now the police are dashing out there. Are you having trouble with Vargas?"

It was Sue Farmer. She didn't sound angry any more. There was concern in her lovely voice.

"I thought you'd gone home," I said.

"Don't parry my question, Mack," she said. "Are you having trouble with Vargas?"

"About the time those cops come through the door, I have a hunch he's going to give me plenty of trouble."

"I don't understand," she said. "What does that mean?"

"He's dead. Murdered. And Mack Gaul is set up for the patsy!"

"Oh, dear!" Sue said, "and you threatened him over the phone. I hope nobody was listening in."

"That's all I need," I said.

"The policemen are spreading out all around the tote board," Sue said. "What are you going to do?"

"This would be a good time to blast off into orbit," I said, "unless you have an equally useless suggestion."

"Oh, Mack! Can't you be serious?"

"I was never more serious in my life. And the next time I suggest we leave and go get saturated with whiskey, don't tell me no. I'd rather have a hangover any time than what I've got."

The door burst open, and by the time I swung around to face it, two cops were crouched there with guns trained on me.

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"Company's come," I said. "Come see me in the dungeons."

"Drop that phone," the taller cop said. "And don't try anything funny."

I dropped it into its cradle. I didn't try anything funny. I couldn't think of anything funny to try.

The tall cop was about thirty-five, skinny, with a long, homely mug. The other one was probably ten years younger, stocky, with wide shoulders, and a nasty smirk on a pinkish face. He looked like he hoped I would try something so he could use me for target practice.

"I have to hand it to you fellows," I said. "You sure got here fast."

"Didn't give you time to run, did we, Gaul?"

The older cop pointed with his empty hand at the bloody corpse. His mouth opened but he didn't say anything. I didn't wonder. It was a pretty messy sight, even for a cop.

"Why should I want to run?" I answered the young cop. "And how come you know my name?"

"Shaddap," the young one said. "We'll ask the questions."

The skinny cop was still pointing.

"Who's this?" he said finally.

"That was Bill Vargas, our tote board operator," I said. "It looks like somebody had it in for him."

"That's the guy that telephoned," the young cop said. "He's the one said Mack Gaul was going to kill him."

"I'm Mack Gaul," I said. "I didn't kill him. He was like that when I got here."

"Sure," the older cop said.

"What do we do now, Jonesey?" the young cop said.

"We wait for Detective Doyle," he said.

"What did you have against this guy?" the young cop said.

"Nothing I'd want to murder him for," I said. "He

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phoned me to come out here. When I got here, I found him like that."

"Sure," Jonesey said. He sounded bored. "He phoned headquarters you were going to kill him, then he called you and invited you out to do it."

"The hell with you," I said.

The phone rang. Without thinking, I reached for it—and damn near got shot. That young cop was balanced on a hairspring.

Jonesey motioned me away from the phone with his gun. He answered.

"Yeah?"

I couldn't hear the other end of the conversation.

"No, this ain't lover," Jonesey said. "Who're you?"

He listened. "Yeah, he's here. But you can't speak to him. He's in custody."

He listened some more.

"It ain't nothing to me, Miss Skelly, whether the races go on or not. We're holding 'lover' for murder and that means he's outa circulation."

The young cop kept his eye and his gun on me.

"How do you know he didn't do it?" Jonesey said. "Were you here?"

Anne wasn't discouraged. She kept after him. Anne was a persistent babe. The length of the ensuing conversation proved it. I fidgeted all the way through it.

Finally she must have worn him down.

"Okay," Jonesey said. "But don't talk nothing but business."

He handed me the phone. "Watch your step," he said. He punctuated his warning by aiming his police revolver at my belt buckle.

"Yes, Anne," I said.

"Who was that character?" she said. "And who's been murdered? And why did you do it?"

"Officer Jones. Vargas. And I didn't do it—in that order."

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"But he says you're in custody."

"That's what's the matter," I said.

"Why would you be in custody if you're not guilty?"

"You mean you have to be guilty to be charged with a murder?" I said.

"Why—why—it's customary," Anne said.

"Explain that to Officer Jones, will you?"

"This is very confusing," Anne said.

"In spades," I said. "Have you located the boss yet?"

"No. He's disappeared. Vanished."

"Then get in touch with our attorney at once," I said.

"If he can't get here in time, he'll have to get me out of the dungeons."

"They don't allow bail in murder cases, do they?"

"Then he'll have to get a writ," I said. "And keep after Badger until you find him."

"Yes, lover."

"And Anne?"

"Yes, love?"

"Call Harry Grant in the mutuel room and tell him he'll have to get a tote board operator out here pronto."

"You know how to operate the board, don't you?"

"I'm in custody," I said. "Remember?"

"Oh, damn," Anne said. "And just when you had promised to settle with me."

"Discouraging, isn't it?"

CHAPTER 5

DETECTIVE DOYLE was a broad, squat man with a barrel chest and a five o'clock shadow. He made me think of the immovable object coming face to face with the irresistible force. He conveyed the impression that the latter would be doomed to come off second best.

When he was disturbed, he had the habit of exploring the channels of his right ear with the pinkie on his right hand.

He was probing it now as he looked first at Vargas, then a searching inventory of the long narrow tote room. He seemed to do this quickly, though I had the impression he was missing nothing, that he was photographing it all in his mind before the technical crew got here to clutter up the place.

I was certain of it when his glance lingered momentarily on the blood smears on the dirty coveralls where I'd wiped the blood off my hands.

The nauseated feeling I'd had ever since discovering Vargas turned to a brassy fear that I could actually taste. Bit by bit, damning pieces of evidence were piling up against me. I had to fight the urge to look at my hands to see if I'd got all the blood wiped off. Not that it would matter if he had the techs make tests of my hands.

He turned to me now, subjected me to his quick, thorough scrutiny, his snapping black eyes stripping me and boring under the skin to see what was going on inside.

"You're Mack Gaul," he said.

His voice was a rich baritone. It surprised me a little. Somehow I'd expected a raspy snarl.

"That's right," I said.

"You work here?"

"I'm the Winter Downs trouble shooter," I said. "My job takes me wherever I'm needed."

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"What were you doing out here?"

"Vargas telephoned me—asked me to come out."

"Why?"

"He said he had some information for me."

"What was the information?"

"I don't know. He refused to say over the phone. When I got here, five or ten minutes after he called, he was dead."

"Why would it take you five or ten minutes to answer an urgent summons?"

"I had no way of knowing it was that urgent," I said. "I stopped at the boss's office and checked with the receptionist. I'd been trying to locate the boss. I stopped there to see if she had found him."

"Had she?"

"No."

"So that should have taken maybe a half minute. What happened to the rest of the time?"

"When I went down to the ramp, Artie Finch stopped me."

"Finch? The tout? What did he want? Did he have some important information for you, too?"

"No."

"You know he's a tout, don't you? You approve of touts operating at Winter Downs?"

"Look, Doyle," I said. "I don't pick your friends for you. Let me pick mine."

"Christ!" he said. "A sensitive trouble shooter." His eyes bored into me. "Mr. Badger approve of this strange friendship? Or didn't he know about it?"

"He knew," I said. "He never said whether he approved or disapproved."

"This tout know you were going to the tote board?"

"I mentioned it," I said. "What does that prove? Artie didn't have anything to do with this."

"I didn't say he did. I just like a tidy record." His glance roved back to the coveralls, then came back to me. "You and this Vargas on good terms?"

A SLICE OF DEATH

"No," I said. "Not exactly."

"How do you mean, 'not exactly'?"

I shrugged. "He was a surly bastard. He never tried to get along with anybody."

"Not much of a reason for killing a man," Doyle said.

"I told you he was dead when I got here."

"Yeah. I heard you. Can you prove it?"

"No. I didn't know I was going to need an alibi."

"You've got a point there," Doyle said. "It's not much, but I'll give it to you. Where's the murder weapon?"

"How the hell would I know?" I said. "I suppose the murderer took it with him."

"Sharp, ain't you?" Doyle said. The young cop had an ugly smirk on his face. Officer Jones looked bored guarding the door. "Being a homicide dick isn't as tough as you might think. The dumb ones are easy to catch. The smart ones catch themselves."

I thought of several cracks I could make, but kept them to myself.

"So you've got an easy job," I said. "So what?"

There was that pinkie exploring his ear again.

"So you threatened this Vargas," Doyle said. "You scared him so bad he called headquarters and said you were going to kill him."

"Doesn't that strike you as unusually convenient?" I said.

He shook his head. "We get lots of calls like that."

"How handy for you," I said. "Knowing who the murderer is even before the act."

"Yeah."

"Tell me, Doyle," I said. "How many of these tips result in actual murder?"

"You want me to quote statistics?"

"Skip it."

"Like I said, you're sharp. It puzzles me why you'd leave yourself wide open like this."

A SLICE OF DEATH

"Oh, for chrissakes," I said. "Maybe I was just trying to make it tough for you."

A tiny smile started at the corners of his mouth, but he didn't let it get away from him. I almost liked the guy.

"You got an explosive disposition, Gaul," he said.

"You're wrong there, Doyle," I said. "I'm amiability itself ninety-nine percent of the time. It's only certain types of characters who can get under my skin."

"How did Vargas get under your skin?"

"I don't remember saying he did."

"You said he was a surly bastard," Doyle said.

"I know a number of them," I said. "They're still alive."

There was a commotion at the door. I looked that way. So did Doyle.

It was Hal Davies, the relay man.

Officer Jones spoke to Doyle. "This guy says he was sent to operate the tote board."

Doyle looked at me.

"Hal Davies, from the mutuel room," I said. "This is Detective Doyle, Hal."

They nodded at each other. Cops never shake hands.

I gave Hal a hard stare. I wondered how he felt coming out here knowing it was the price manipulation he had to be in on that got Vargas killed. Or was it? For the first time I considered the possibility Vargas had been murdered for some other reason. God knows, the guy must have had a slew of enemies.

I'd always figured Hal for a pretty regular guy. But how could I be so sure? I didn't really know him except as an employee. He was good at his job, and always agreeable. The rest of his fellow workers seemed to like him.

Some guys have two personalities. One for the job. One for away from the job. He could have been a homicidal maniac away from the job, for all I knew.

Both he and Harry Grant had been absent from the mutuel room when I tried to reach them. From what Jerry had said, they often ducked out between races. Could

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either or them have been away from the mutuel room about the time Vargas was killed?

Hal was looking at the bloody mess that had once been Bill Vargas. His face was about the color of putty. Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. Then he whirled and raced to the door.

Officer Jones grabbed him, but all Hal wanted was to heave his cookies outside the door.

When he got through, and came back, his hands were shaking.

"What do you know about this?" Doyle said.

"Nothing," Hal said. He sounded breathless. "Harry might have told me what I was walking in on."

"Harry who?"

"Harry Grant."

"Who's he?"

"The mutuel manager. He sent me out to take over. He just said something had happened to Vargas."

"You know this guy?" Doyle said, bobbing his head in my direction.

"Sure," Hal said. He looked at me like he was expecting me to tell him how much or how little to say. "Everybody around the plant knows Mack Gaul."

"Ever have any trouble with him?" Doyle said.

Hal looked at me again. I gave him a blank stare.

He shook his head. "He's a right guy in my book."

"Okay," Doyle said. "Get on with your work."

"How'd it happen, Mack?" Hal said.

"Ask Doyle," I said. "He knows all the answers."

"Get on with your work," Doyle said.

Hal climbed up onto the catwalk. He looked down at me. His face was still pasty, and he looked scared.

Hal Davies was a big man, almost as big as I am, but there was a weakness about him. You got the impression he wouldn't be much good in a brawl.

He bent over the teletype, finally, ripped off a length of tape and began making changes on the board. I won-

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dered how Vargas had managed to get his teletype fixed in the short time before he was killed? Or maybe it had never been inoperative. I had only Vargas's word for that.

The technical crew arrived then, and there wasn't any chance for Doyle to question me further. He ignored me. I figured he had all he wanted until he took me downtown. The real interrogation, as they call it, would start then.

The tote room was narrow. I was in the way. Doyle finally noticed it.

"You still here?" he said.

"You didn't say you were through with me."

"Beat it," he said. "I can pick you up any time I want you. If you don't think so, try running out."

I turned away and started to leave. The young, broad shouldered cop was in the way. He looked pained, as if Doyle was making a big mistake.

"Your disappointment shows," I said. I gave him the elbow as I passed.

CHAPTER 6

ARTIE FINCH was waiting for me on the edge of the ramp as I entered the chute from the track.

"What's going on out there?" he said. "What're all them badges doing here?"

There wasn't any point in being secretive about it.

"Vargas got himself murdered," I said.

"Yeah?" Artie said. "Who's Vargas?"

"The tote board operator."

"Most of the guys that work around here, I know," Artie said. "Him, I didn't. What did he get murdered for?"

"He didn't say."

"You found him?" Artie said. "You called the cops?"

"I found him dead," I said. "The cops showed before I had a chance to report it."

"How come?"

"Vargas—or someone who said he was Vargas—phoned headquarters that I was going to kill him."

"You, Mack? I never knew you to murder nobody. You might half kill somebody if you thought he had it coming. But not for real." He grinned. "How did you talk yourself out of it?"

"I didn't," I said. "Sometimes, it pays not to have an alibi."

"Yeah?"

"You notice anybody leaving the tote board five minutes or so before I talked to you?"

"Like who?"

"Like, maybe, Hal Davies—or Harry Grant."

"I see Hal go out there a couple minutes ago."

"I know," I said. "What about before that—before I went out?"

"Nope."

"There had to be somebody," I said. "And somebody had

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to see him." I was thinking of my strange feeling that thousands of pairs of eyes were watching me as I went out there. How could anybody go out there without being seen?

"Oh, that," Artie said. "You asked me if I seen somebody I knew, somebody that worked around here."

"Who did you see, Artie?"

"I don't know exactly," Artie said. "Just a guy."

I tried to be patient.

"Think, Artie. This could be important."

"It wasn't nothing," Artie said. "I just happened to notice this guy walking out there toward the tote. There wasn't anything going on at the moment, and I just happened to notice him, that's all."

"But it wasn't anybody you recognized?"

"Nope."

"You could have been looking at Vargas's killer, Artie," I said. "Can you describe him?"

"Well, I dunno. I didn't pay particular attention. I didn't see his face. He was walking toward the tote with his back to me."

I groaned. Very few people ever go out there. Certainly, nobody except an employee with legitimate business should go out. But this was a stranger to Artie. It was even money the guy was a murderer.

"You've got to do better than that, Artie," I said. "Was he big, medium, or short? Fat or skinny? Come on. Think."

"Jeez, Mack, I dunno," Artie said. "I size up my customers pretty careful. But this guy wasn't no customer." He tried to think. Made heavy going of it. "Seems like he had on a tan suit, though, and—yeah, I did notice something about him."

"What, Artie? Come on. Give."

"Well, he kind of seemed to list to the right. Yeah. His right shoulder was lower than the left. That was it."

"That's all you remember about him? A tan suit, and carried his right shoulder low?"

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"That's all I can remember, Mack."

"Do you think you'd recognize him if you saw him again?"

"I dunno. I might. Only, like I said, I didn't pay too much attention."

"And you're sure you never saw him before?"

"He didn't ring no bell, Mack."

"Okay," I said. "Keep after it. If you remember anything else, let me know."

"Sure."

I turned away, started to leave, then turned back.

"Don't mention this to anyone, Artie," I said.

"If you say so, Mack," Artie said. "You want to tell me why?"

"If the guy you saw was the murderer," I said, "he probably wouldn't like it that you noticed him."

"Oh, that!" he said. "I'm a guy that knows how to look out for himself."

I grinned. "Sure," I said. "But if you don't let on you know anything, nobody's going to be mad at you."

"How about you?" Artie said. "You going around asking questions. The guy might not like that, either."

"I got a big stake in this, Artie. I'm practically accused of killing Vargas. If I can catch up with the guy, I get myself off the hook."

"Or in the morgue," Artie said. "You go hunting for this guy, you better let me go with you."

"It's not your trouble, Artie."

"The hell it ain't. You and me's friends, ain't we?"

"Sure. But you keep out of it. I don't want to have to take time out to go to your funeral. But I will do this. If I need help, I'll whistle. In the meantime, let me know at once if you remember anything else about the guy."

He wrinkled up his pink brow, got a pained expression on his guileless face. "You wouldn't be holding out on me would you, Mack?"

"Could be," I said. "What do you think I'm keeping back?"

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"For instance, you asked about Hal Davies and Harry Grant. Where do they fit in a murder?"

"It was just an idea I had," I said. "A bum idea. Forget it."

He gave me a skeptical look, shrugged, and walked away.

Anne Skelly was talking on the phone as I walked into the boss's outer office.

It seemed to me she cut the conversation off short when she saw me. Probably it was my overinflated ego. But she acted real happy to see me.

"Lover!" she said. "That flatfoot said you were in custody."

"I was. Detective Doyle told me to beat it. He's letting me dangle. I think he expects me to outsmart myself."

"How silly can he get? Imagine Mack Gaul outsmarting himself."

"Yeah. Thanks for calling Harry. He sent Hal Davies out."

She smiled. It made me think I'd been wasting a lot of time.

"I got our attorney on the line, too," she said. "He promised to come right out."

"Good. What about the boss?"

She shook her head. "Still missing," she said.

It made me mad. "Almost seems like he's hiding out on purpose," I said.

"Lover!" she said. "How could you think such a thing about J. Worthy?"

I grinned. "I'm partial to the old rogue," I said. "Don't think I'm not. But just when I need his moral support, he turns up A.W.O.L."

"There must be a perfectly logical explanation," Anne said. "Uh—do we have a date tonight?"

"I'd like that," I said. "If I'm still at large. And if I'm not tied up on this investigation."

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"That's a lot of 'if's'," Anne said. "Why shouldn't you be at large? And what investigation?"

"Doyle warned me he'd pick me up whenever he chose," I said. "And I've got to do a little prying on my own, about the murder and about another matter which may, or may not, be connected with the murder."

"Don't you think J. Worthy's confidential receptionist could be let in on this other matter?"

"Why not?" I said. I sat on the corner of her desk. She wiggled her warm, moist hand into my big paw and sat there looking up at me, waiting.

She made a very disturbing picture. It wasn't easy to collect my thoughts. Not to center them on murder, and payoff manipulations, anyhow.

With comparatively few meanderings, I told her about the tote board finagling, and my reasons for thinking Vargas's murder was a result.

It was the only explanation that would jell with the fact that I had been set up as the patsy for the Vargas killing. I also mentioned my suspicions of both Hal Davies and Harry Grant, and the possibility that Ralph Beauchamp, the auditor, was involved.

"I know all three of those men, personally," she said. "I'm sure you're mistaken about them."

"I hope you're right, beautiful," I said. "I hope you're right. Maybe you've got a better idea?"

"I have," she said. "You're trying to cover up because of your loyalty to Winter Downs. Why not give them the benefit of the same doubt?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, supposing Vargas was the only one actually involved. When you showed them what was happening, maybe they covered up the tote board discrepancy by altering the tapes and things." She turned on the fetching smile again. "They'd almost have to do that or the fans would notice the difference between the tote board figures and the actual payoff figures."

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"Nice try," I said. "How many of those larcenous, lovable souls would put up a howl if they were paid more than the tote board showed?"

"Maybe not very many," Anne said. "But the men in the mutuel room wouldn't dare run the risk of having anybody question the accuracy of the totalisator results. They'd lose the public's confidence."

"I'd like to believe those fellows aren't involved in anything criminal," I said. "But there's one small matter you haven't explained."

"What's that?"

"The averages. Twelve hundred in the first race and about four grand in the second. What happened to that?"

"I don't know," Anne said. "But I'm sure there will be a perfectly logical explanation when the thing is unraveled."

"Have it your own way," I said. "The trouble with you, you try to think nice about everybody. People aren't like that. We're all born larcenous. It's only our training, and the law, keeps us from being savages."

"Tsk!" Anne said. "I'll bet you even think bad things about me."

"I do, gorgeous," I said. "I do."

"And you're still going to let a stuffy old investigation keep you from our date tonight?"

"I'll take it under advisement."

"Poof! Be careful, lover. I've been working on you for a long time. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you now."

CHAPTER 7

I LEFT Anne without making any definite promises about seeing her. It might be that now that Sue Farmer had indicated she was no longer angry with me, our date might be on again.

There was no doubt in my mind that Anne could be had. Sue could be had, too, but in a much different way.

I abandoned these pleasant contemplations as I made my way below to the mutuel room. Now that I had raised the question of what might have happened to the over-ages in the first and second race pools, I decided it was time I checked. Maybe, since Vargas's murder, Harry Grant might be scared enough to cooperate—if he knew anything.

As I walked past the betting cages toward the mutuel room door, I looked out at the tote. The cops still guarded the place. I figured Doyle was still busy inside. I hoped he stayed busy so he wouldn't have time to concentrate on me.

I went around the end of the betting stalls, and knocked on the mutuel room door. I debated, while I waited, whether to lay it on the line with Harry, or use Doyle's technique—let him outsmart himself.

I decided some straight talk was best. Whoever heard of a trouble shooter being subtle?

Jerry, the chalk boy, opened the door for me. He was tall and gaunt, and pushing seventy. He could pass for a Kentucky Colonel if he was dressed for the role. Right now, he was out of character in a green apron such as carpenters wear, the kind with a big pocket all the way across, for nails. This was where Jerry carried his chalk.

His job was to keep the blackboards up to date as to weights, and scratches.

"Thanks, Jerry," I said. "Harry Grant here?"

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"On the relay desk," he said. "He sent Hal out to the infield."

"Mmmm," I said, walking past him and heading for the relay desk.

This time, with no Sue Farmer to distract their attention, everybody seemed to be looking at me.

I ignored them, and the questions in their eyes. I bore down on Harry Grant.

He looked up just as I reached his desk.

"Walk away from me, Mack," he said. "I'm too busy for small talk."

"So let's make big talk."

He swung all the way around. He looked at me and frowned. "With you in a minute," he said.

He tapped out some changes for Hal out on the tote. I watched him, wondered why he felt he had to take over Hal's work. Surely he had some hired hand he could put on Hal's job.

I didn't like the answer I got to that one. I hadn't been kidding when I told Anne I hoped Harry, and the others, were somehow in the clear.

He finished, finally. "What's on your mind?" he said. He kept his back to me while he found a cigarette and lighted it. Then he shoved the pack toward me.

I shook my head.

Harry stared at me fixedly with little or no expression on his face, but a kind of tight watchfulness.

"Anything new turn up on that price foul-up in the first race?" I said.

"What could turn up?" he said. "I cleared the tapes with you."

"So you did," I said. "But the price Vargas had on the board was forty cents light."

"The last I saw of you and that cute little chick, you were on your way to correct that."

"It was too late to change it," I said. "The fans had already been paid off at five dollars."

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I let that sink in a minute.

"I didn't hear any more from you," Harry said. "I didn't check into it any farther." He took a nervous drag on his cigarette. "If the tote and the cashiers' sheets agreed, that's good enough for me. You must have made a mistake in your figures."

"The tapes you showed me bore out my figures," I said.

"You must be mistaken, Mack. I've been busy. I don't remember what those tape figures were. But this I do know. I'll take my totalisator results any time over your slip-stick results."

"How long has Hal Davies been with you, Harry?"

"Five—six years. Why?"

"Any reason to distrust him?"

"He wouldn't be working for me if I couldn't trust him. Come out with it, Mack. What are you digging at?"

"I pinned Vargas down, Harry. He tried to buy me off. When I threatened to blow the whistle on him, he offered to give me names."

Some new odds changes came through from the electronics monster. Harry took them and relayed them to the tote.

"You telling me he named Hal?" he said, finally.

I shook my head. "He wouldn't give me anything over the phone. When I got there to pick up the information, I found him murdered.

"So Vargas was a crook as well as a mean tempered bastard," Harry said. "What's that got to do with Hal Davies?"

"Isn't it pretty obvious Vargas had to have a confederate in the mutuel room?"

"I see what you mean," Harry said. "You could be pointing the finger at me, too."

"I don't want to," I said. "I'm anxious to have you talk me out of it."

He thought about it.

He got up from his desk, looked around the room and

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beckoned to a young lad by the name of Charlie Hassel to take over the relay.

Harry took me by the arm and steered me to his office, a small cubbyhole partitioned off from the rest of the long room.

We went in and he closed the door.

He pointed to a chair but didn't sit down himself. He paced the small square room, and avoided looking at me.

"When Anne called me to send a replacement out for Vargas," he said, "she just said something had happened to him. There was no mention of murder. I thought the slob had taken to drinking on the job." He thumped his right fist into the palm of his left hand. "Better fill me in."

I gave him all he didn't already know, including the pay-off manipulation in the second race.

"You didn't tell me about that, Mack," he said.

"I telephoned. You weren't here. Neither was Hal."

"Yeah. I guess we were out for a coffee break."

I tried a shot in the dark. "Was that before or after Vargas phoned you?" I felt like a heel as soon as I said it.

"Don't try to get cute with me, Mack," Harry said. "Vargas didn't phone me either before or after." Then he shrugged. "I guess we better get down to facts and figures before we're at each others' throats."

He tried on his slow smile. It looked a little sickly.

He left the office and was gone several minutes. I worried over what he had given me so far. Nothing. Then he was back with Ralph Beauchamp in tow. Ralph had a ledger under one arm, and some strips of tape in his hand.

"Let's start from the beginning," Harry said. "We'll check the tapes on that first race again."

I couldn't see what good that would do, but I went along with it. I hoped Harry knew what he was leading up to.

Beauchamp laid the tapes out in front of me on the desk. He was a medium sized man with one of those unfashionable, straight up and down figures, and thin, colorless

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hair. His eyes were colorless, too, and seemed to bulge behind thick lenses.

"How much overage did you have in the first race, Ralph?" I said.

"Overage?" he said. "Overage?" he wheezed when he talked. "You mean breakage?"

"I know how much breakage there was."

"Oh. Why there wasn't any to speak of. Of course, there are always a few fans who don't cash their tickets until after the last race. And occasionally a drunk will throw away a good ticket that never gets cashed unless some stooper finds it."

"I'm talking about twelve hundred dollars in overage, Ralph."

"No. Nothing like that."

Harry brought out his slow smile again. This time it looked healthier, relieved, like it didn't have a care in the world.

I wondered what kind of fast mathematical legerdemain Ralph was going to pull on me. Like I mentioned before, Ralph could make figures say anything he wanted them to.

He fooled me. He didn't try to fast talk me. He simply opened his ledger, pointed to the tapes he'd laid on the desk, and supplemented them with the sheets containing the cash balances after the first and second races. Then he stepped back and let me have at it myself.

He didn't have to do a selling job on me. Everything checked to the penny. And like he said, no overages.

It was a real, workmanlike job. It was phony as a seven dollar bill. But there was nothing about it that could implicate Ralph Beauchamp. He ran his audit from the material and cash balances handed to him.

But it was phony. I remembered enough about the original tapes Harry Grant had shown me to know these weren't the ones. On these, the total pools had been altered to substantiate the five dollar payoff.

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While I hadn't seen the second race tapes, it didn't take much to figure these had been rerun too.

"All right, Ralph," I said. "Take them away."

He gathered up his stuff and eased his fat behind out the door. When he was gone, I turned back to Harry, gave him the level stare.

"Those weren't the tapes you showed me, Harry," I said.

The smile stayed on his face, but it took some effort.

"You marked them, maybe?" Harry said. "You put an identifying mark on them so you'd know them the next time you saw them?"

I hadn't, of course. And he knew damned well I hadn't if he was in on this caper. He'd have made sure of it before destroying the originals, and running new tapes. So there was nothing to be gained by trying to run a bluff and say I had.

"No," I said.

"So it has to be the way I said. You made a mistake in your slide rule calculations."

I knew I hadn't. And I knew Sue Farmer hadn't. But there was no way I could prove it. If I tried to make an issue of it, I'd only succeed in making myself look silly.

I got up to go. "In that case," I said, "Bill Vargas was murdered needlessly."

I left him chewing on that. The smile had vanished, and the expression on his face said he didn't like the taste of what he was chewing.

CHAPTER 8

OUTSIDE on the apron, I looked toward the tote board. The meat wagon boys were carting off what was left of Bill Vargas.

One cop had been left behind to stand guard at the door. From here it looked like the broad shouldered young cop with the itchy trigger finger.

I didn't see Detective Doyle. I didn't want to see him. Common sense told me he wouldn't leave the grounds without another stab at me.

I climbed the stands to my office, expecting to find him waiting there.

What I found was the toothesomely torsoed Sue Farmer, slipstick in hand.

"This is where I came in," I said.

She smiled at me and I forgot about Detective Doyle. "I've made a lot of trouble for you, haven't I?"

"You had no way of knowing it would lead to murder," I said.

"You told me over the phone to come see you in the dungeons," Sue said. "What are you doing here?" She grinned impishly.

"Detective Doyle has my cell all picked out and the door open," I said. "He's just waiting for me to put my foot in my big mouth."

"Did you tell him about the forty cents?"

"What forty cents?"

She gasped, and gave me that crook-in-the-family look again.

"Look, honey," I said, "you see before you a new man who has just come from a session with your cute new boy friend, the pari-mutuel manager, and his chief bookkeeper." I told

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her what I'd found. "So you see, we haven't got a shred of proof that John Q. Public got chiseled out of a single sou."

"So you were right," she said, "Mr. Grant is involved."

"I don't know," I said. "I just don't know. If I finger him for the funny-money caper, I finger him for murder, too. I can't see Harry in a murder role."

"You're loyal to your friends, Mack," she said.

"Is that bad?"

"Only if you cover up for them when they're wrong."

"I don't know if Harry's wrong, yet," I said. "I've got no proof against Hal Davies, or Ralph Beauchamp, either. I can't even prove there has been a funny-money deal."

"Let me talk to Mr. Grant," Sue said. "I'll bet I can tell if he's lying."

"You keep out of it," I said. "Whoever killed Vargas isn't going to let a cute little chick upset his nice apple-cart."

"It's already upset," she said. "There hasn't been a single discrepancy on the board since Vargas was killed."

"I hope you're right," I said. "But I don't believe it."

"Why?"

"Because if they were scared out and willing to call it off, there'd have been no point in killing Vargas. They'd have accepted my ultimatum to cease and desist."

"But there's been no new shortages."

"Just a lull while the heat's on, sweetheart. Somebody's playing for keeps."

"That's rather frightening," Sue said. She frowned then.

"Were you joking about Detective Doyle suspecting you?"

"It's no joke."

"But why should he?"

"The cops walked in on me before I had a chance to report the murder, for one thing," I said.

"Then somebody must have called them."

"Yeah. Vargas. He called them and told them I was going to kill him."

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"How awfull! Of course, you *did* threaten him over the phone. But how could he have taken that seriously?"

"He didn't," I said. "It didn't bother him a bit."

"Then I don't see . . .?"

"I think he was forced to do it," I said. "I think the killer was there and forced him to call me, also, and ask me to come out." I thought about it a second. "He was plenty nervous when he called. He sounded scared."

"Did you explain that to the detective?"

I shook my head. "He's not the kind of guy you explain pet theories to."

"But you must," Sue said. "You must have told him something. You're not in custody."

"I told him I had no alibi."

"You're impossible."

"I mean it," I said. "He still thinks I'm guilty, but he's puzzled over why I didn't establish an alibi. He's giving me a chance to hang myself."

"Aren't you frightened?"

"No—that is, hell yes. I'm scared silly." I shuddered. "He gets me in that dungeon of his and I've had it."

She set her lovely chin firmly. "I'm going to tell him the whole story," she said.

"You'll tell him nothing," I said. "You're not even going to talk to him. And that reminds me, he may be popping in here any minute to harass me, so get going. Take off. Get lost." I glared at her, or tried to. "And don't talk to anyone about this. The killer gets wind of the fact you're the one discovered this caper, you'll wind up on the slab next to Vargas."

"Oh, Mack!"

"Nobody knows you know anything about it," I said. "Keep it that way."

"You're still trying to cover for the track, aren't you?" Sue said. "I don't think you can do it now that murder is involved."

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"I may have to level with Doyle, later, about the price finagling, but I don't have to bring you into it."

I was aware of movement in the doorway. I hadn't heard footsteps in the hall, but when I looked, Detective Doyle was framed there watching me.

So the guy wasn't normal. He was watching me instead of Sue.

I wondered how long he'd been there.

CHAPTER 9

I took Sue by the arm, walked her over to the door.

"Come on in, Doyle," I said. "Miss Farmer was just leaving."

He stepped inside. Sue tossed him a small smile, and me a small wave, and walked out.

Doyle's eyes followed her out of sight. The guy was normal after all.

We walked over to my desk and got seated.

"Where does she fit in this?" Doyle said.

"She doesn't," I said. I didn't enlarge on it and he didn't press the point. He had something else on his mind.

"We found the murder weapon," Doyle said. He watched me closely.

"That so?" I said.

"You're a cool one, all right," Doyle said. "Aren't you going to ask me what it was and where we found it?"

"All right," I said. "What was it and where was it?"

"Stashed in the cross members under the catwalk," he said. "A machete."

"Would a thing like that be traceable?" I said.

"Probably not, but we'll ask around. My guess is it came from Cuba—a sugar cane cutter."

"Any prints?"

He shook his head. "Wiped clean." He stared out the wide windows toward the tote board. "Why do you suppose the killer didn't take it with him, and stash it someplace where it couldn't be found?"

I saw what he was leading up to, but I didn't bite.

"I suppose that would be standard procedure," I said. "On the other hand, I wouldn't call splitting a man's head with a machete a standard type of murder."

"Messy, all right," Doyle said. "Murder's never pretty. But why risk leaving something behind that might pos-

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sibly be traced—unless this killer didn't have time to get away and hid the weapon in the first place he could think of."

"You're priceless, Doyle," I said.

He looked at me like he didn't think I was priceless. "You got a better idea?"

"I have."

"Let's hear it."

"Having timed the murder, the phone call to headquarters, and the phone call to me so that I would be at the tote discovering the murder when the police arrived," I said, "why not go a little farther and hide the machete under the catwalk, where it would almost certainly be found, to make you think exactly what you're thinking?"

Doyle pursed his lips, probed his ear channels with his pinkie. "It might make sense," he said, "if you could give me a reason why anybody would want to frame you."

"And if I can't?"

"Then I'll have to take you in and book you." He considered this a moment. "Maybe I'll take you in and book you anyway."

"I've showed you a reasonable doubt," I said.

"I'm just a cop, not a jury."

The man was trying to be fair, but it was obvious he wasn't going to put up with much more of my stalling. I was going to have to lay it on the line for him either here in my office or downtown in the interrogation room.

I decided it would stand a better chance of reaching him here. I wouldn't be any good to myself, or Winter Downs, in jail.

If J. Worthington Badger disapproved of it later, it would match my disapproval of his being A.W.O.L. now.

"Well?" Doyle said.

"All right," I said. "Here's what happened. But it's just between us two. I don't want the reporters to get hold of this."

"You're in no position to make deals," Doyle said. "I'll

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decide after I've heard it whether the papers get it or not."

"In the first race this afternoon, the win payoff on the tote board showed up forty cents light. I checked with the mutuel room, but all seemed in order there. Thinking it had to be strictly a tote board error I went out and braced Vargas about it. He was hostile and abusive."

"Is that when you threatened him with bodily harm?"

"I don't recall saying I threatened him," I said.

"You didn't," Doyle said. "Nevertheless, you were overheard. The way it was given to me you said you'd personally break his goddam neck."

I was stunned for a minute. Nobody had heard me say that but Sue.

I picked it up rather lamely. "No, it wasn't then. And it didn't mean anything. It was just one of those things a guy will say when he's irritated."

"You admit the guy irritated you?"

"Why not? He irritated everybody he came in contact with. Now are you going to let me tell what happened?"

"I'm listening."

"It was too late to correct the discrepancy. The winning tickets had already been paid off. My only thought at that time was to find the error and correct the source so it wouldn't happen again."

"Go on," Doyle said.

I gave him the rest of it. He got more and more interested as the scope of the thing unfolded. He let me tell it my way, without interruption.

I leveled with him, with very few omissions. For instance, I couldn't see any point in telling him I'd searched Vargas's body. I was in trouble enough without that. Nor did I tell him of Sue's part in the discovery. There just didn't seem to be any point in dragging her into it.

When I'd finished, Doyle looked thoughtful and not wholly incredulous.

"So you figure somebody knocked Vargas off because he

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was about to sing," Doyle said, "and set you up for the patsy to sew your lip?"

"That's the way I read it," I said.

"It might be all right," Doyle said, "if you can prove what you've told me."

"I can't prove a goddam bit of it," I said.

That hint of a smile crinkled at the corners of his mouth again. This time it almost got away from him. He shook his head.

"A corpse is the best fallguy in the world," Doyle said finally. "He never talks back."

"Meaning Vargas?"

He nodded. "According to your story he admitted he was running a whizzer on the payoffs. But you can't prove there was anything funny about them."

I didn't say anything. There didn't seem to be anything to say. It didn't look like I'd helped myself a damned bit by leveling with Doyle.

"There are a couple of other things that bother me," Doyle said.

"Tell me," I said.

"You went out to the tote board because, you say, Vargas telephoned you that he was ready to give you names and other pertinent information. Right?"

"After he had failed to scare me off by threatening to point the finger at me as the mastermind of the caper. And after he had offered to see if he could get me cut in for a piece of the loot."

"Yeah. And you say you refused that."

"That's right."

"And you say he was already dead when you got there, and that you didn't get the information you went after."

"Yes," I said, "and no."

"How do you mean, 'yes and no'?"

"Yes, he was dead, and no, I didn't get the information."

"Assuming you leveled with me up to that point—up to

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the point where you found the body—why are you holding out on me about the names and stuff?”

“I told you I didn’t get it.”

“I think you did. Who are you protecting?”

“You’re all wet,” I said.

“That information was important to you. You searched the body and don’t say you didn’t. It was a very gory murder. The murderer might have got blood on his hands, but I don’t think so. Not with a big weapon like a machete. But a guy that searched the body would be sure to get his hands messed up. He wiped them on the coveralls hanging from the catwalk.”

“So?”

“So you searched the body. Vargas had the names and stuff written down. You got it.”

If I admitted searching the body, now, I was in for it.

“That’s one way of looking at it,” I said. “A nice try, incidentally. But I prefer another version.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“The murderer would be even more interested in that information than I. Let’s say he killed Vargas to prevent it reaching me. Wouldn’t it be natural for him to search the body to make sure Vargas hadn’t written it down? And to remove it if he had?”

Detective Doyle didn’t answer. His pinkie probed the channels of his ear. “This Miss Farmer, this little doll that just left here—why are you trying to keep her out of it?”

So he had heard me tell Sue I’d keep her out of it. If he caught me in one lie, he’d discount everything I’d told him and cart me off to the bastille. He probably would, anyway, but I had to keep trying.

I stalled. I fumbled a cigarette out of my pocket, offered one to Doyle. He refused, just watched me. I took my time lighting up.

“Miss Farmer,” I said finally, “is a university student. I never saw her before today. She came here looking for material for her graduation thesis. She stumbled on the

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short price on the tote board and called it to my attention. No need to involve her at all."

"For a smart guy, you can be awful dumb, Gaul," Doyle said. "A minute ago you said you couldn't prove a damn thing about this price altering. In her you have a witness who could back up your story that there was some funny business going on. But you shoo her out as soon as I get here, and tell me she's got nothing to do with it. Why?"

"All right," I said. "Now who's being dumb? You saw Vargas. You saw what he looked like. Can you imagine what that lovely girl would look like with her skull split down the middle? And for what? Just for asking her to back up my statement that there was a money manipulation. No, Doyle. Either you take my word for it, or you don't.

"A tough guy," Doyle said, "with mush under the vest."

The smile got away from him this time. In fact, it stretched across his cop's face in a broad grin.

"What else is bothering you?" I said.

"I got some checking to do," he said. "Stick around."

CHAPTER 10

I SAT there at my desk a long minute after Doyle left.

The guy worried me. I couldn't tell whether I'd sold him anything or not. The more I thought about it and the longer I sat, the shorter my time seemed to get. I decided the guy was still paying out rope, waiting for me to do something too smart and hang myself.

I had the uncomfortable feeling that when he was through checking, and was ready to go to town, I was going to be his unwilling passenger.

I had other things to do. Doyle had given me an idea that needed investigation. Maybe I should have told him about it. He had the organization, and connections, to follow through on it better than I.

On the other hand, I had one special qualification he didn't have. I wasn't a cop.

I was thinking of the man with the sagging right shoulder that Artie Finch had seen. He looked like the murderer in my book. And Doyle had told me the murder weapon was a machete, probably of Cuban origin.

There are a lot of Cubans in Tampa. They run the bolita racket, and, so I've heard, the horse book syndicate, and a few other cute little activities like dope, and prostitution . . . and murder. Yeah. Tampa's Ybor City has a long and unenviable record of unsolved murders.

If Tampa's finest went in there, at Doyle's request, looking for a machete murderer, with a droopy right shoulder, he would suddenly become very hard to find. Nobody would know anything . . . for talking purposes.

Not being a cop myself, the guy probably wouldn't bother hiding from me. He might even hunt me up. And I might become just one more in the long list of unsolved murders.

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Well, if he didn't get me, Doyle would. I was in it with both feet any way you looked at it.

It was such a slim lead, Doyle probably wouldn't want to ask the Tampa Police to check on it, anyway. And it might bring Artie Finch under fire.

There was only one way to play it. Solo. And fast, before Doyle made up his mind to throw the key away on me.

He hadn't said so, but by helping myself, and solving the murder for him, he might respect my request that the payoff manipulation be kept from the press.

Sure, Doyle had told me to stick around. And J. Worthington Badger would expect me to stick around in his absence. But if I was right in my suspicion of the guy Artie had told me about, and if I could find him, get the proof out of him, and bring him back, I wouldn't need to worry too much about what Doyle and Badger might think.

Yeah. That's all I had to do.

It was a slim chance, but it was the only idea I had.

I went to Anne's office to tell her I was leaving and that she'd have to handle anything that might come up.

"All right," Anne said, "but you'd better tell me where you're going."

"It's better if you don't know," I said.

"I don't think I like that, lover," Anne said. "If I can be trusted to run Winter Downs, I should be trusted with state secrets."

"Look, beautiful," I said. "I'm under a cloud. Doyle told me not to leave. If you don't know where I've gone, you won't have to lie to him when he comes looking for me."

"Poof!" she said. "I'd enjoy lying to him." She frowned delightfully. "Besides, what if the boss calls, and I have to tell him you ran out and refused to tell me where you were going?"

She had a point. I didn't want Badger to think I'd panicked and run away.

"If Badger calls," I said, "you can tell him I'm following up a lead on the machete wielding s.o.b. that killed Vargas."

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Tell Doyle nothing except that I'll contact him when I get back."

"You musn't do this, lover," Anne said. "It's too dangerous. He'll kill you, too."

"I guess he'll try," I said. "Maybe I'll be lucky."

"If you know who it is," Anne said, "why haven't you told the detective? It's his job to apprehend criminals."

"I've got my reasons," I said. "Stop worrying."

Her bedroom manner slipped away for the moment. She even looked a little hard. She was very serious.

"You've got to tell me what you've found out, Mack. I promise not to reveal it unless you fail to return."

I was learning things about Anne today. She had a good head on her shoulders. I hadn't considered the fact that my meagre information might end up in the morgue with me. She was right. Someone else must share my information, just in case.

"I don't have too much," I said. "I can't give you a name. But Artie Finch saw him going out to the tote shortly before I found Vargas dead. The description is sketchy . . . a tan suit and a drooping right shoulder. I have reason to believe the man is a Cuban. I expect to find him in Ybor City.

"It isn't much, is it?" Anne said.

"No, but I think it's enough. I intend to let it be noised around in the right places that I'm looking for such a character. I'm counting on him hearing about it. I'm counting on him coming after me."

"It frightens me," Anne said. "Suppose he doesn't rise to your bait?"

"He'll have to," I said. "Once he knows I'm after him, he'll have to try to eliminate me." I grinned wryly. "Like I said, I hope I'll be lucky."

She shuddered deliciously. "I feel like I'm seeing you for the last time."

As I passed by my office on the way out, I heard the

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phone ring. It had stopped by the time I reached it. I stood with hand outstretched, debating whether to lift it and see if the caller was still there.

It might be Detective Doyle. I didn't want to speak to him right now. It might be Harry Grant, or Hal Davies, ready to talk a bit now that there'd been time to think things over.

Hell, it could be anybody. There was only one way to find out who.

I picked up the receiver and heard someone speaking. First, I recognized Anne's voice. Then another one came through. It sounded breathless and frightened.

"But I must reach him," Sue Farmer said. "Maybe, if he just left, you could catch him by using the P.A."

"Mr. Gaul had a very important errand," Anne said. "He wouldn't thank me for intercepting him."

"This is very important, too," Sue said. "It could even be a matter of life and death."

I could have cut in right then. I don't quite know why I didn't. Maybe I didn't want them to know I'd been listening in without identifying myself. Maybe it was something more vague which I couldn't understand myself.

"Very well," Anne said. "I'll see if I can reach him."

I could hear Sue's excited breathing over the wire. Then the P.A. blared, "Mr. Gaul. You're wanted on the telephone. Mack Gaul, telephone, please."

I waited a minute to make it look good. Then, "This is Mack Gaul."

"Oh, Mack!" Sue said. "I'm so glad I caught you. The operator said you had left."

"I was on my way out," I said. "What's up? You sound tense."

"I'm frightened, Mack. I was followed when I left the track."

"You ought to be used to that," I said. "Who'd follow you but some romance-minded jerk?"

"Please be serious."

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"All right. What makes you so sure you were followed?"

"When I noticed this car behind me, I had a scary feeling. I slowed down, and he slowed down. He made no effort to come up alongside of me. Then I made several turns, thinking he might go on. He followed me, keeping about a half block behind all the time."

"You recognize him?"

"He hasn't come that close—yet. But he's driving a robin's-egg blue sedan. And he's wearing a tan suit."

There are lots of tan suits in the world. It didn't have to be the guy Artie had seen going out to the tote. How would he know about Sue? I hadn't mentioned her discovering the money caper to anyone but Doyle.

Could it be he'd put a tail on her? Then I knew it wasn't possible. Doyle had been with me in my office for some time after Sue left. And there was the tan suit. I don't like coincidence. And if it wasn't coincidence, Sue could be in grave danger.

"Where you calling from?" I said.

"The Bayou Drug Store." She mentioned an address on the outskirts of Tampa.

"Stay there," I said. "I'll be along in a few minutes."

"Hurry, Mack. I'm awfully scared."

"Order yourself a soda or something. I'll be there as quickly as I can," I said. "Pick a seat where you can't be seen from the street."

"All right."

"Sue."

"Yes?"

"Try to relax. If the guy really was following you, he probably thinks you stopped at the drug store to call the cops. He's probably miles away by now."

I hung up, started to leave the office, then turned back to the desk. I pulled the drawer open where I kept the Ortgies automatic. It wasn't there.

It wasn't in the other drawers, either. I tried to remember when I'd seen it last. Couldn't be sure. And if tan suit

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was who I thought it was, there wasn't time to waste in search or speculation.

I hurried out of there, keeping a sharp lookout for Doyle as I reached the ground floor and veered off toward the main gate and the parking lot. This was no time to tangle with Doyle.

The guards at the gate handed me curious stares as I hustled past them. The grapevine had no doubt relayed the word about Vargas's murder. No doubt they wondered why I'd be leaving the plant early with that kind of trouble on my hands.

The hell with them. Let them worry about it.

I turned left outside the hurricane fence, and bore down on my venerable Lincoln Cosmopolitan in its reserved parking slot.

Somebody was sitting in my car. When I got close enough to recognize him, I saw it was Artie Finch.

"I been waiting for you," he said.

"So I see," I said. "What's with you?"

"That copper," he said. "He's been giving me a bad time."

"Doyle?"

"That's him."

"Did you tell him about seeing the man in the tan suit?"

"I gave him nothing—not even the time of day." He shrugged. "He's a cop," Artie said. "Full of cop ideas."

"You got anything else for me?" I said.

"No."

"Look," I said. "I'm kind of in a hurry."

He looked hurt, like I was trying to brush him off, so I told him about Sue Farmer's phone call.

"She the one who gave you the lipstick?" he said.

"Artie!"

"Awri'," he said. "Awri"! So I got nothing else to do on account of that cop making me leave the track early. I'll go with you."

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"I can handle it," I said.

"Didn't you say you couldn't." He didn't move. Artie could be stubborn once he got an idea. His idea now seemed to be to bodyguard me whether I liked it or not. There was no time to argue with him.

I fired up the Lincoln and gunned it out of the lot and swung left on the County road toward Tampa.

I poured on the coal, and we rode in silence for a long moment.

"So you're a very tough and very efficient trouble shooter," Artie said, "a very self-sufficient guy. So you don't need help from Artie Finch, or anybody else. Awri'. But I come from a long line of ancestors that used to buckle on sword and breastplate when a lady was in distress."

"You don't even know Sue Farmer," I said.

"That matters?" Artie said. "She's a female woman in distress, ain't she?"

"Mmmm," I said. "And you're a committee of one out to prove that chivalry isn't dead."

"Yeah. It don't mean I think you couldn't deal with this situation all by yourself."

"Sure," I said.

"Uh," Artie said, "you're figuring this guy in the tan suit for the killer. What would he be after this Sue what's-her-name for?"

"He must have found out, somehow, she was the one discovered the funny money deal."

"I knew you were holding out on me," Artie said. "What funny money deal?"

I gave him a quick rundown as we barreled along.

"So that's why you asked if I'd seen either Harry Grant or Hal Davies go out to the tote board," he said, half to himself. "I don't figure either one of them boys for killers."

"This tan suited guy may be a pro," I said. "He could have been hired by anybody."

"Yeah. But not Harry or Hal. They might get their mits in the damper, but they wouldn't go for murder."

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"I didn't know you knew them that well," I said.

"In my business," he said, "you have to be pretty good at sizing people up. You don't have to be lifetime chums."

"What's the rest of it?" I said.

He looked at me obliquely. "What makes you think there's more?"

"I can read you like an open comic sheet. Come on. Give."

"You couldn't say book. It had to be a comic sheet, yet," Artie said. "Awri'. So a few years back, when I used to travel the circuits more extensively than I do now, I made the Sportland Downs meeting. That's where I got to know Hal and Harry and Ralph Beauchamp. They were working for the Sportland, then, and there was a little trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"As I understand it, the outdated machines couldn't be locked electrically from the starting gate when the horses left the barrier. Somebody, I'm not mentioning no names, was punching out a few tickets on the winner after the races was over, creating a minus pool now and then."

"Mmmmm."

"It was hushed up," Artie concluded. "About this same time, Hal, Harry, and Ralph left the employ of the Sportland Downs horse factory. I lost track of them for a while. The next time I see them, they're working for Winter Downs."

"Why haven't you told me this before?"

"There didn't seem no point in bringing it up," Artie said. "The boys seemed to be doing a good clean job at Winter Downs. And like I said, the caper at Sportland was hushed up. They weren't accused of nothing. Maybe they just left because they didn't like working where there was something smelly, like that. I ain't one to push guys around that might have been the victim of circumstances."

"Very considerate," I said.

"I been pushed around a little myself, Mack," Artie said. "It ain't funny."

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"All right."

"You're being shoved yourself by this Doyle copper," Artie said. "Maybe you're enjoying it?"

"All right," I said.

We rolled in silence for the next mile, me watching out for speed cops and trying to think which way this thing was pointing.

If Ralph and Harry and Hal had been implicated in post finish ticket punching at Sportland, maybe somebody had found out about it and was forcing them into participating in this new deal at Winter Downs. Yeah, blackmail. Like Artie, I was trying to give them the benefit of the doubt.

If this thing was big, nationwide instead of just a one track gimmick, the three mutuel room men might still be implicated. They would almost have to be. Control of key men in the mutuel department would be essential if a bookmaking syndicate was behind it. And it would explain the droopy shouldered guy in the tan suit without directly involving Hal, Ralph, and Harry in murder.

The more I considered it in this light, the better it seemed to add up. So maybe I was letting my personal regard for those three fellows influence me. But I couldn't help but believe if it was only a comparatively small, localized operation, say, Vargas, Grant, Davies, and Beauchamp, they'd have submitted to my ultimatum and knocked it off, glad to get out from under so easily when they knew their caper had been discovered.

It was Vargas's murder that made the difference, and the fact that it was apparently committed by an outsider, a stranger to Artie who knew nearly everyone connected with the track.

Like I said, bookmaking—betting illegally away from the tracks—runs to seven billion dollars annually. A "saving" of a few thousand, daily, at each operating track, by the simple expedient of lowering payoffs to the winning bettors,

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could run up a fabulous annual score. Maybe as much as a billion dollars.

The life of one Vargas, or a dozen like him, would be readily forfeited to protect such a score.

The cold-blooded professionalism of the Vargas murder seemed to point toward a syndicate, too. And the elaborate way I had been tied into it. I could hardly conceive of this as amateur planning.

I tried to see the whole picture as well as my noncriminal mind could picture it. The overages at each track, say, would be ample to compensate the key men locally for their necessary cooperation. Thus the total take from off-track wagering would go to the syndicate. It would cost them nothing to add a billion annually to their already tremendous profit.

It was flawless.

It scared the hell out of me.

Mack Gaul, single handed, topples multibillion dollar racket. What a headline that would make. What a dream. It would more likely read: Mack Gaul murdered for sticking his nose into lucrative syndicate business.

Yeah, make room, Vargas. Here comes Mack.

CHAPTER 11

WE WERE STILL a block away from the Bayou Drug Store when I saw the police cruiser double parked in front, and the curious crowd on the sidewalk.

I got scared all over again, and I don't mean for myself this time. At that moment, I couldn't think of any other reason why a prowler car should be there and a crowd gathered, except that something must have happened to Sue.

I angled the Lincoln into a parking place at the curb a couple of cars ahead of the cruiser. I was seeing the bloody, all but unrecognizable mess that was Vargas all over again. Only this time it wasn't a grape-bloated man's body.

I took what hope I could from the absence of an ambulance. It was short lived. Maybe the ambulance just hadn't got here yet.

In that case, I thought, it must have just happened.

"Take a look around, Artie," I said. "See if you can spot a robin's-egg blue sedan."

I hurried to the drug store entrance on the corner. I shoved my way through the crowd, went inside. Nobody said anything. This was encouraging. I hoped it meant there'd been no murder.

What then? I wasn't overanxious to ask the uniformed cop talking to the bald-headed man who was obviously the proprietor of the store. Somehow, I was shy of cops since Vargas got himself killed and put me on the hook for it.

I looked around. It was one of those homey little neighborhood stores that would be jammed at certain hours with school kids slurping sodas, cokes, and banana splits. Definitely not the kind of place in which you'd expect to find dead bodies.

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I didn't find any.

I didn't find any live body, either. At least not one belonging to the lovely Sue Farmer. The lone phone booth from which she'd called was empty. I poked my nose in anyway.

On the shelf under the coin box was a small slip of paper with the Winter Downs number on it. I put it in my pocket.

When I turned to leave the booth, the uniformed cop was watching me.

"You got business here?" he said.

I nodded, tried to appear surprised that he should ask me.

"You didn't make no phone call," he said. He gave me a cop-clever look to let me know nobody was putting anything over on him.

"Oh?" I said. "Oh, that? It's a conditioned reflex with me. Every time I see a phone booth, I just have to check the coin slot."

"Yeah, huh?" He looked at me as though I was just another odd ball in a world of odd balls, then walked over to a booth where seven youngsters were crowded into the space meant for four.

I went to the soda bar, and the proprietor moved toward me, behind it, to take my order.

I ordered a coke with a dash of lemon. While he was fixing it, I tried to draw him out.

"Have a holdup, or something, here?" I said.

"No."

I tried to hide my irritation. "Something must have happened," I said. "Cruiser double parked outside and a policeman asking nosey questions inside."

He just looked at me, went on with the coke project.

"Let's try it this way," I said. "I was supposed to meet a young lady here, a very lovely young lady with auburn hair and green eyes."

He stirred the concoction he'd made and set the glass

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on the marble in front of me. He still didn't have anything to say except, "Ten cents."

I gave him his dime.

"She was here," I said, "and don't tell me no. She called me from that phone booth." I fumbled the slip of paper out of my pocket, let him see it. "My phone number. I found it on the shelf under the coin box."

"She was here," he said. "She left."

"Alone?"

"You engaged to this girl, or something?" he said.

"No," I said. "Let's just say I'm interested in her welfare."

"No, she didn't leave alone," he said. "It seemed to me she left unwillingly. That's why I notified the police."

"You mean she was forced to leave?"

"Not exactly. Not physical force, that is. This man came in, showed her a badge, and took her out. If he said anything, I didn't hear it."

"He identified himself as a cop, so you called the cops?" I said.

"Yes. I mistrusted that he was a detective."

"You knew him, then? You knew he wasn't a cop?"

He shook his head. "I never saw him before. But policemen, even plainclothes policemen, have a manner about them I find easy to recognize. This man didn't have it."

"I know what you mean," I said. "This guy was dressed in a tan suit, maybe, and his right shoulder sagged?"

He looked mildly surprised. "You know him?"

"No. That's all I know about him. Describe him for me. What did he look like?"

"Medium tall, and a sort of slithering manner about him like—well, sort of like a sidewinder. And he had a face like a piece of diseased liver. And he smelled."

"You see which way they went?"

"No. I called the police. When I went outside to look, they were out of sight."

The uniformed cop was still talking to the kids in the booth as I barged out the door and turned up the street

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to the parked car. Artie was just crossing the street, slanting toward the Lincoln. I climbed under the wheel and waited for him to join me.

"I didn't find the blue sedan, Mack," he said. "But I found a lady that seen it pull away with the tan suited guy and the chick in it."

"Which way?" I said.

"Thataway." He jerked his thumb in a general downtown direction.

"This is a good time for you to check out, Artie," I said.

"Nix." He yanked the car door open quickly, like he thought I might try to drive off without him, and plumped his big frame inside.

I had the car moving before he'd got the door closed. I headed downtown, breaking every ordinance in the book.

"You're driving like a man with a mission," Artie said. "Where we going?"

"Ybor City."

"You got a reason?"

"Vargas was murdered with a machete," I said. "Doyle guessed it as Cuban. Ybor City is Tampa's little Cuba."

"It figures," Artie said dubiously, "what there is of it. Trouble is, it ain't enough. What are you gonna use for names and addresses and stuff like that? Ybor City's got lots of streets and alleys."

He didn't have to tell me what a longshot I was playing. And he didn't have to tell me how little time I had. Tan suit might already be using a machete on Sue.

My only chance was to keep the cops out of this in the hope the guy might come out in the open after me, if I didn't have any law tagging along.

"I know," I said. "I've got a better description of the guy now. I hope it will buy me a name, and an address."

"But would he take a snatched chick to his own place?" Artie said. "Wouldn't he just take her out to some isolated place and knock her off?"

"Artie!"

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"Awri," he said. "But you gotta be realistic. You consider them things or you might get shut off in the stretch turn."

"How realistic can you get?" I said. "You said they were last seen heading downtown."

"Yeah," Artie said. "That's what the biddy told me."

"The thing I can't figure out is how this guy figured Sue Farmer. I mentioned her part in it to nobody but Doyle."

"You should never tell a cop nothing," Artie said. "They ain't reliable."

Then it came to me suddenly. And I didn't like it a bit. I swore.

"What's the matter?" Artie said.

"Harry Grant and Vargas," I said.

"What about them?"

"I took Sue with me when I first questioned Harry in the mutuel room. And she was with me at the tote board when I jumped Vargas about the error on the board."

"But you didn't mention it was her discovered it, did you?"

"It wouldn't matter," I said. "Either one of them could have added two and two and got four. In any case, they had to know she knew about it."

"Don't be kicking yourself," Artie said. "At that time you didn't know it wasn't anything but an ordinary boo-boo."

"That doesn't help Sue, now," I said. I shoved harder on the gas pedal.

A couple of minutes later I saw the big sign on the Las Novedadas restaurant, and we were entering Ybor City.

CHAPTER 12

YBOR CITY, though it has its own honorary mayor, is not a city at all, but a section of Tampa. The casual observer, driving through, might not even know he was in Ybor City unless he took note of the Spanish names on the store fronts. If he got out of his car to browse around, he would notice the inhabitants speak predominantly Spanish.

On the surface it is no more ominous than any other foreign section of any other American city. But if you know its background, and if you happen to be on the kind of mission I was on, you see beyond the false front and your skin feels like it's crawling.

At least, that's what my hide felt like it was doing.

Part of it was the natural excitement of adventure, a big gamble for high stakes. Part of it was the cold, controlled rage I felt for the tan suited murderer, and the anticipation of meeting up to him, face to face.

Mostly, it was fear I might be too late to save Sue Farmer.

I thought of what I had to do. The thoughts moved, in my mind, with a creeping stealth, as though they were being watched by bitter, sadistic eyes staring out of a face that resembled a hunk of diseased liver. I thought of blonde receptionists who could be had, and lovely, curious, auburn-haired innocents who lived alone and could be had also, but in a different way. I thought of smart and deadly cops, watching, waiting for me to outsmart myself.

I had already outsmarted myself. Doyle would know by now I'd left the track against his orders. He would have a pickup order on me by now.

Sweat stood out in icy bumps on my forehead. I couldn't afford to make any mistakes now. Yet there was no time for careful weighing. I shivered.

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I herded the Lincoln down a narrow, dirty street. It was little more than an alley, full of alley smells. Halfway down the block was an unlit neon, El Tejon.

"What's down here?" Artie said.

"El Tejon."

"What's at El Tejon?" Artie said.

"A guy," I said. "His name's Philamon Valeda."

"What's with him?"

"He's a bookie," I said. "Or at least a runner for the syndicate. You must have seen him around Winter Downs. He's the guy that brings the comeback money to dump in the machines when the books get overloaded on some one horse."

I braked the Lincoln and parked beside a sign at the entrance that read, "No Parking—Loading Zone".

"Yeah," Artie said. "I've seen him. I never heard his name. How come you know him?"

"I don't," I said. "Except on sight. The Pinkertons checked on him when he began showing at the track with important money. They passed his dossier on to me."

"So?"

"I have to start somewhere," I said. "Maybe he knows the tan suit."

"It's reasonable," Artie said, "but them guys all got bad memories."

"Maybe he'll remember to pass the word I'm around," I said, "and asking questions."

"A trap, yet," Artie said. "And using yourself for bait. That could get risky."

"If you're scared," I said, "wait in the car."

I got out. He did, too.

"I ain't that scared," Artie said. "Besides I gotta protect my concession. Winter Downs has to get a new trouble shooter, maybe he don't let me operate."

I grinned at him, tried to put more optimism into it than I felt.

El Tejon occupied the ground floor of a drab four story

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building. The only thing that distinguished it from the other drab four-story buildings was the neon sign. It wasn't the kind of place that advertised, or tried for the tourist trade. I wondered why its owner even bothered with the neon sign.

Inside it was like a lot of other such places throughout the country, except for the strings of red chili peppers hanging on pegs along the back bar.

A long bar occupied the visible length of the room on the right side. Along the left hand wall were booths. At the back wall, next to the door, was a juke box, now silent, but with its varicolored lights showing.

The whole layout could do with a redecorating job, and some deodorizing, but the back bar mirror and the bar itself was spotless.

The door by the juke box would open into the "horse parlor". It was a thing you knew without going back to investigate.

The lone bartender could have doubled for the Mexican bandido, Pancho Villa, and he looked about as trustworthy.

He wasn't busy. The only other customer in the bar was an obvious wino, a disreputable, bleary-eyed character with an empty wine glass, and no money in front of him. He looked like a lost dog, a permanently lost dog.

Artie and I bellied up, and the bartender moved in front of us. No greeting. No change of expression. But his eyes, black buttons, were reading me inscrutably, trying to catalogue me for future reference.

"Rum," I said.

"Me, too," Artie said.

The wino looked at me longingly. I could almost see his mouth watering.

"Give the muchacho one too," I told the barman.

The wino didn't say anything, but he twitched in anticipation. If he'd had a tail, he'd have wagged it.

Pancho set them up and Artie and I drank. The stuff was dynamite. It would cure anything from a jaded husband

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to a grasshopper plague. I gasped, and waited while it blasted its way to my stomach and then started branching out through my personal plumbing.

When I decided my throat would work again, I watched the barman as I put my question to him.

"Philamon around?" I said.

I might as well have watched a hunk of granite for all the expression he displayed.

"Quien sabe," he said, his lips barely moving.

"You savvy all right. Valeda. Philamon Valeda, the syndicate runner."

"I don' know you, gringo."

"What do we have to have, a formal introduction?" I said. "So hear me good. I'll go over it once, lightly. Or would you rather I'd tear out the woodwork and find the guy myself?"

He just looked at me. Waited.

"The name's Gaul," I said. "Mack Gaul. Assistant to the manager of Winter Downs race track. I want a word with Philamon Valeda and I'm in a hurry. We can keep it friendly if you want to."

He considered it a moment while he leaned on the bar, both palms flat on the mahogany. Then the right hand moved, hurriedly, and disappeared under the bar. He could have been reaching for the bar rag, or a bung starter, or there could be a buzzer under there. Then the hand reappeared, empty, and I felt Artie relax at my side. I let out a breath, too.

While we waited he filled the glasses again—the bum's, too. And this time, he poured one for himself. This round was on the house, obviously. It could mean we had been accepted. Or it could mean something else.

This one went down easier. Maybe my throat was still partially embalmed from the first one. Anyhow, I was feeling no pain when the door in the back wall opened and Phil Valeda entered the bar area.

He was a real neat looking character, about light-heavy

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in proportions, with dark hair and very white teeth which he bared as he flashed me a smile of welcome. This lad would be fast with the hands, and had a grace of movement, like a professional dancer, or maybe a bull fighter.

"Welcome to Ybor City, Señor Gaul," he said.

"Thanks. You know Artie Finch?"

"But, of course," He nodded to Artie.

"Hiya, Phil," Artie said.

Here was an affable, on the surface, educated hood. His english was flawless, with only a trace of soft guitar music in it. It was hard to dislike him.

"I'm pushed for time, Señor Valeda," I said, "so I'll get right with it."

He nodded, glanced at our glasses, then at the barman. "Our friends' glasses are empty," he said.

"My turn," I said. "Pancho set up the last round."

The bartender glared at me. He didn't like being called Pancho. I couldn't have cared less.

He filled them up, and made a cuba libre for Valeda. I paid for the works, including another for the bum. The bartender abstained.

I let mine sit and turned my attention back to Valeda.

"I'm trying to locate a man," I said, "who, I have reason to believe, may be on the syndicate pay roll. So far, I don't have a name for him, but when last seen he was wearing a tan suit. Medium build. Right shoulder sags noticeably. Has a mug like a diseased slab of liver. And he smells. He's also handy with a machete."

Valeda considered it. He thought hard. He made heavy going of it. I glanced at the barman while I waited. He watched Valeda.

"With a so graphic description, I'm sure I would know this man if I ever had seen him," Valeda said. "Since I have not, I am unable to help you. What makes you think he might be a syndicate employee?"

"Just an idea I had," I said. "Would it make a difference if he wasn't?"

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Valeda grinned as though I were a very droll fellow, but there was a glint behind it that almost broke the surface of his affability. "How could it since you have not told me why you wish to locate this man?"

I didn't have time, patience, or inclination to bandy words with this character. I let him have it straight.

"Liver-puss murdered my tote board operator with a machete early this afternoon," I said. "Then he kipped an innocent young lady he figured knew something about the funny-money deal being manipulated on the payoffs. I figure he was carrying out syndicate orders."

The affability mask dropped away completely.

"You could get too smart," Valeda said. "You could find out it doesn't buy you anything but big trouble in Ybor City."

"I already got big trouble," I said. "If you want to try to convince me your syndicate's in the clear, lend a hand at turning up this boy."

He considered it quickly. "Yes," he said, "you have a point. There's no need for us to quarrel. I'll make some inquiries. Where will you be in half an hour?"

"I'll be back here," I said, "if I haven't caught up with the bastard myself by that time."

CHAPTER 13

THE RUM HAD stirred up my appetite, and I realized I'd skipped lunch today. Not intentionally. I'm usually right there at chow time, but things had got kind of screwed up today.

"I could do with some vittles," I said.

We were standing on the narrow walk in front of El Tejon. Artie looked at the entrance over his shoulder, his pink, guileless face shadowed by suspicion.

"How can you think of grub with that sharpie in there studying ways and means to cut out your gizzard?"

"Don't be crude, Artie," I said. "Philamon has too much finesse for a gizzard cutter."

"What's finesse?" Artie said. "You get just as dead."

The wino came out of El Tejon, walking on his heels. He gave me the eye without appearing to and steered an uncertain course toward the end of the block where we'd entered.

"There's a restaurant just around that corner," I said. "Let's go."

"I ain't hungry," Artie said. But he came along.

The wino seemed to get tired before he got to the corner. He listed into a doorway, and slouched against the frame.

As we came abreast of the doorway, he didn't look at us but his lips moved. "Would a light blue sedan be of interest to you, Señor?"

I stopped, fumbled in my pockets for cigarettes and lighter. "It would," I said. "Where?"

I lit the cigarette, let him see the double sawbuck that came out with the smokes.

"There is the small yard at the rear of El Tejon," he said. "It is cut off from the alley by a high board fence. A light

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blue sedan was parked in the small yard shortly before you came into the bar."

I crumpled the twenty into a wad, flicked it in his general direction. It fell at his feet. He gave it a quick glance but didn't stoop to pick it up. He covered it with his foot.

"Anything else?" I said.

"The driver is known as El Puerco," the wino said. "Use care, señor. Vaya con Dios."

"The young lady?" I said.

"Si. She was with him."

Artie and I moved off without looking back. Food was the farthest thing from my mind now. I wanted action. I wanted blood. El Puerco's blood. If I found him in my present mood, Doyle would never see him alive.

"It won't be dark for an hour, yet," Artie said. "What do we do now?"

"We can't wait for darkness," I said. I handed him the keys to the Lincoln. "Go back and get the car. Bring it around to the alley."

"You'll wait for me, Mack?" Artie said. "You won't try to go in after the guy by yourself?"

"The car, Artie."

"Awri." But I don't like it. It's too easy—that bum tipping you off like that. Did it occur to you Valeda might have sent him?"

"It did," I said. "I also considered the chance the bum might have been on the level. In either case, it should lead me to the guy I want."

"I ain't over-fond of cops," Artie said. "Especially, I'm not fond of Doyle. But right now I wish him and his boys were handy."

He walked away from me, glancing back several times like he was hopeful I'd change my mind.

I watched till he turned the corner, then took off in the direction toward the alley that would run along the rear of El Tejon.

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I felt very much alone as I turned into it. The stench of decaying garbage, and the premature twilight in this narrow canyon between buildings, did nothing to ease the feeling.

I came within an ace of stumbling over a bum, snoring in his newspaper nest, an empty wine bottle clutched in a grubby fist.

I felt like I'd stumbled into another world, the unlovely backside of Ybor City.

Midway of the block, I came to the high board fence. There could be no mistake that this was the one the wino referred to. It was the only one. All the other buildings abutted the alley. Only this one was offset to accommodate a small backyard. Perhaps the original builder had intended it for a patio. If so his dream had turned into a nightmare.

The fence was about eight feet high, and there were double doors, closed, which would allow a car to pass through when open.

I pushed against them. They were barred on the inside.

I glanced both ways along the alley, saw no one. I grabbed the top of the fence with both hands, heaved and swung a leg over. A moment later I dropped to the littered ground in the gloomy enclosure.

I looked at the powder-blue sedan, then felt of the radiator. It was still warm, and somehow it gave me hope. Sue might still be all right.

There was a little-used door on the ground floor next to the enclosed wooden stairway that zigzagged up the outside of the building.

I moved close to this door and listened. A bored voice was giving the results of the fifth at New Orleans in Spanish.

I heard a car in the alley. I waited. Listened. It went by. But it gave me an afterthought. I went back to the double gates and removed the two-by-four bar. The gates sagged inward, tiredly.

I was convinced now that El Puerco held Sue captive on

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one of the upper floors, and since I could remember no entrance to the front of the building except the one we'd used to go in the bar, this outside stairway was likely the only means of entry.

It was dark and musty in the walled-in staircase as I tested each step for telltale squeaks before trusting it with my full weight.

After an eternity of cautious climbing, I stopped and listened on the second floor landing.

I wondered what was keeping Artie? I hadn't heard a car stop in the alley. I hoped he hadn't decided to do something foolish. I shrugged it off. Like he said, Artie was a lad who could look after himself.

I put my ear close to the door panel. I couldn't hear anything but the pounding of blood in my ears.

I tried the knob, slowly, cautiously. It was locked. Then I examined the door. It was old and warped and shrunken. It fit very loosely in its frame. It would be no trick at all to break it down. But it would make a helluva lot of unwanted noise.

The stop strip on the door frame was held by flat headed wood screws. A worn dime from my change pocket served as a screw driver. I loosened two of them, one below and one above the spring lock.

I used my pocketknife, slid the blade under the loose strip and probed for the lock's plunger. I felt it give. I had it made.

The swish I heard a fraction of a second too late. It could have been made by a descending sap—or a machete.

It felt like at least a thousand megatons going off inside my head—blinding light, mushroom cloud and all.

CHAPTER 14

IT WAS pitch dark. In my unreal and very sluggish confusion, I tried to concentrate on getting my eyes open. I finally arrived at the conclusion they were already open.

I still couldn't see anything. I decided I was dead. Just as I was convinced of it, a wave of nausea enveloped me and I heaved all over the blackness. And with the violent retching came excruciating pain.

That tied it. I wasn't dead after all. I only wished I was.

The pain wasn't only in my head. My wrists and ankles hurt like hell, too. Yeah, I was bound, tightly, hand and foot.

When consciousness fully returned finally, I realized I was lying on my side, and on something very unyielding, probably the floor.

I didn't have long to ponder. The noise I'd made retching brought company. First it was just a stealthy slithering sound. Nothing I could nail down. Then there was sound of a door being fumbled open, and dim light.

The light seemed to come from behind my back. I tried to turn over for a look at my visitor. I just couldn't cut it. I got nothing for my trouble but new waves of pain. I closed my eyes against it and the dizziness it brought. I guess I passed out again momentarily.

The next thing I was sure of was the bonds on my ankles were being cut, and I was yanked roughly to my feet, and was forced out into a long musty hall. This was where the light came from.

I couldn't see my captor. He stayed behind, nudging me with a pointed instrument. But I could smell him, and the strange grunting noises he made sounded like a pig. Yeah—El Puerco.

It didn't take much guessing to know that the sharp

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instrument was a machete. I wondered how many of them the guy had.

My feet felt like they were encased in molten lead but I kept them moving. For all I knew liver-puss might be herding me to the slaughter pens, but for the moment, as long as I obeyed the proddings, I seemed to be making out about as well as could be expected.

The hall was endless, but he finally herded me into an office on the left, near the door I'd been burglarizing when I got clobbered. At least that's the way I figured it unless I was badly twisted in my orientation. Why not? I was badly twisted in every other way.

This office was a revelation. It was clean, well lighted, air-conditioned, and lavishly furnished in a modern motif. It was shocking, considering the rest of the building.

Behind the elaborately massive desk sat Philamon Valeda looking as sharp, self-satisfied, and affable as ever. He showed me his white teeth.

"Come in," he said. "Come in, Señor Gaul."

"I'd have been here sooner," I said, "but I ran into a little trouble."

"Too bad," Valeda said. The s.o.b. sounded like he really thought it was too bad. "But you're impulsive, Señor Gaul. Had you given me the full half-hour in which to handle the thing as I proposed, this interum—uh—inconvenience could have been spared you."

He took an ugly looking Spanish Astra automatic out of a drawer, laid it on the desk in front of him.

He saw me looking at the pistol.

"Just a precaution against a further display of your impulsiveness," he said. "Once we understand each other, it will no longer be necessary."

He looked at El Puerco, and addressed him in Spanish. He was instructing El Puerco to remove the bonds from my wrists.

He did. With the machete. I'll bet the guy used that handy tool to eat with, too—if he wasn't fed in a trough.

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I held my breath, expecting to lose a few thumbs at least. He cut me free without leaving so much as a scratch, no mean feat with such a weapon.

"Now, pour Señor Gaul a good stiff pony of rum," Valeda said.

When El Puerco went to the corner bar to pour the rum I got my first look at him. It was an unrewarding experience. There's only one word that might do more justice to El Puerco than disgusting, and that word would be revolting. Of course, I could be prejudiced.

There was little more I could add to the description I had already pieced together from Artie's and the drug-gist's combined efforts.

I sank into the soft, leather-covered chair across the desk from Valeda, and massaged my wrists gingerly. I knew I needed the drink, but I also knew I couldn't handle it until I got some life back into my wrists and hands. He sure had those bonds on tight. The bastard didn't know his own strength.

El Puerco slithered across the large room with a large, well filled glass in one hand. In the other he carried the machete. It was probably a twin to the one Doyle found under the catwalk in the tote room. He extended the drink to me.

The guy actually handed it to me. He was safe. My outraged hands, or rather wrists, weren't up to throttling anybody yet. And besides, Valeda was watching me, his quick fingers only inches from the Astra. And there was the machete. With El Puerco, there would always be a machete.

"Drink hearty," Valeda said. "You look a little peaked. It will bring the color back to your face."

His concern for me was very touching.

I trembled it, two-handed, to my mouth and dumped it down. It tussled with my upset stomach. A couple of deep breaths saved the day. I held it down, and a moment later was glad I did.

It helped. It helped a lot—and fast on my empty stomach.

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Valeda told El Puerco he could leave, and the slob slithered out.

"That's a relief," I said. "How do you stand the sonofabitch?"

"He has been useful," Valeda said. "Usefulness is not always combined with the beauty and perfume of the rose."

"You slay me, Señor Valeda."

"I hope that won't be necessary, Señor Gaul."

"One point, at least, on which we concur," I said.

"Believe me, I abhor bloodshed, Señor Gaul. It is—ah—inconvenient, though sometimes quite necessary. Am I making myself understandable?"

"I'm way ahead of you," I said. The big slug of strong rum was doing things for me. I felt a thousand percent better. I even felt a little reckless.

It was sheer, alcohol induced bravado. Deep down, I knew what a helluva spot I was in.

I gauged the distance between me and the Astra. It was too far. A dive for it now would only get me a hole in the head.

"Now," Valeda said, "if you will just relax and contain yourself in patience, I will point up a few basic facts for you."

"Where's Sue Farmer?" I said.

"Quite safe," he said, "for the present." He shrugged. "Her continued safety can be assured by your acquiescence to the proposition I'm about to offer you."

"You've got the inside rail," I said. "I have to listen whether I want to or not."

"Just so." He thought about it a minute. "Due to the curiosity of the charming Miss Farmer and the bungling of Vargas, you were able to see, and properly evaluate the small changes in price on the tote board."

"Yeah," I said. "Bolita looks small, too, if you only look at one piece of it."

"Well put," Valeda said. "Our price altering operation was but in the test-run stage. A small piece, as you so aptly put it. But with the bugs worked out of it, and put

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into nationwide operation, perhaps you can visualize its scope."

"I already figured that," I said. "It could run to a billion dollars."

"Precisely. Much too juicy a melon to permit outside interference."

"Meaning me, of course," I said. "And Sue Farmer. What did you mean by Vargas's bungling?"

"The fool altered the win payoff in that first race without altering the total pool figures to compensate. The curious Miss Farmer thus discovered the discrepancy and reported it to you. Then when you finally saw through it, and began to apply the pressure to Vargas, he lost his nerve. He was about to wreck the whole operation."

"So he was murdered, and I was tagged with it."

"It was felt, after thoroughly investigating you, that you could not be reached by ordinary means. Detective Doyle now has a pickup order out on you. If you refuse to listen to reason, I will be forced to turn you over to him. You will be charged with the Vargas murder. And, believe me, Senor Gaul, he'll have enough evidence to make it stick."

"And the alternative?" I said.

"We do not wish to have a shake-up at Winter Downs. The murder has already caused enough inconvenience. So, if you capitulate, you will be allowed to continue as the track trouble shooter, with a substantial increase in untaxed wages. All that will be required of you will be that you hear nothing, see nothing, and say nothing about our little operation."

"What about the murder rap?"

"We will take care of that," Valeda said.

"How?"

"By supplying Doyle with the real killer."

"So El Puerco gets sold out," I said. "Nice. Nice and slimy. What keeps him from talking?"

"He's a mute," Valeda said. "He's also illiterate. And he

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also hates police. Especially gringo police. He wouldn't give them anything if he could. Not even to save his life."

"What's to keep me from talking once I'm free of the murder rap?"

"By that time, you will be involved. You will also be watched until you are entirely under control. We have an employee at Winter Downs, an on-the-spot manager, you might say, who is in a position to know all that goes on. Any indiscretions would be dealt with immediately."

"This key employee has a name?"

"Please, Señor Gaul. Do not think us so stupid. For the present, at least, this person's identity must remain a secret."

"What about Sue?"

"She is young. Impressionable. Perhaps sensible is a better word. She will come to understand that silence is a cheap price to pay for her life—and yours. She will remain with us temporarily. This will also assure your complete compliance."

"You've got it sewed up pretty tight," I said. "It leaves me no choice. When do you get Doyle off my back?"

"At once," Valeda said. "We can deliver El Puerco to Doyle within the hour."

The door flew open behind me. I swung around in time to see El Puerco charge through, brandishing his machete, stark, terrifying blood lust on his disgusting face.

I thought it was me he was after and dove to one side. But he must have been listening at the door. He must have finally come to understand Valeda was selling him out. He made straight for him, the machete ready.

Valeda was stunned for a fatal second, not understanding. When he saw it, and grabbed the Astra, there was only time to squeeze off one shot.

I thought I heard the impact as the bullet hit El Puerco's revolting body, but it didn't even slow him.

Then the machete came whipping down.

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In my frantic dive to get out of El Puerco's way, I got all tangled up with the telephone wires, a waste basket, and the hard overhang of Valeda's elaborate desk.

I was a sitting duck for El Puerco if he wanted to try for two. But by the time I got untangled, and my head cleared enough to be able to get my eyes to focus, there was no one in the office but me—and Valeda. And he no longer mattered.

I dashed out into the hall. El Puerco was nowhere in sight. I thought of Sue. Maybe the maniac had gone after her.

I raced back into the gory office, finally found the Astra on the floor behind the desk. Wheeling back into the hall, I began my search for El Puerco—and Sue.

There was no time to waste. The shot may have been heard below. Pancho, the bartender, and no telling how many other fine characters might come to investigate.

I pushed open one door after another. If El Puerco had been lurking behind any of them, I might have got a split skull for my haste. But he had disappeared completely. There was no one on this floor at all. Valeda's office was the only room furnished or in use. Unless you want to count the one where I'd regained consciousness.

I hurried back along the hall to the outside stairway. I could see nothing below. It was so dark I couldn't even be sure if the blue sedan was still parked in the yard.

I felt my way up the stairway to the third floor. I didn't waste any time on the lock here. I kicked the panel close to the lock with my heel. My still sore ankle protested but the door gave way.

"Sue!" I called.

I thought I heard a small wimper from behind the closed door on my right.

I turned the knob, gave the door a shove and jumped back, the automatic at the ready.

Nothing happened.

I used my lighter, and eased into the room. I knew she

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was here even before I saw her. I recognized her delicate perfume.

She was trussed and gagged, lying on an army type cot. Her clothes were badly disarranged from squirming and twisting in her efforts to get free. But this was no time for sight seeing.

I got the gag off first.

"You all right?" I said.

"Just frightened, I guess. I kept telling myself you'd come."

"Sure. Good old reliable Mack." I worked on the knots feverishly. "Next time you see anything fishy looking on a tote board, you run like hell."

I got her free at last.

"Let's go," I said. "Can you walk?"

"Yes. I think so. If you'll kind of hold your arm around me."

We got all the way down to the back yard without being shot at, slugged, or cut in half by a machete.

It was when I flicked on my lighter again to try to find the way out that we saw El Puerco. He was face down in the litter, only a couple of feet from the sedan.

He wasn't moving and he wasn't breathing. Valeda's slug had hit him, all right. Liver-puss was dead. And so was my hope of using him to clear myself of a murder rap.

Valeda could have cleared me, but he was dead, too. And Doyle had a pickup out on me. He was convinced I'd outsmarted myself. And from where I stood, it sure looked like I had.

He'd probably want to tag me for Valeda and El Puerco too.

CHAPTER 15

THE LINCOLN wasn't parked in the alley.

"Artie Finch was supposed to have the car here waiting," I said. "Something must have happened to him."

The buildings were all jammed close together. We had to walk all the way around the block to get to the front of El Tejon.

The Lincoln stood where I'd left it.

"Inside the car," I told Sue. "And lock all the doors. I'll be back as soon as I find Artie."

He wasn't in the El Tejon bar. Pancho swore he hadn't seen him after the two of us left together earlier. But Pancho had an angry looking lump on his jaw. I was suspicious.

"I think you're lying," I said. "I better find him real soon or I'll take this goddam louse trap apart board by board."

I went outside, looked up and down. I didn't see anybody. I was turning to go back in the bar when I heard the sound.

"Pssst. Psssst."

I swung toward it. The wino was peering around the corner of a building two doors away. I walked toward him, ready for anything.

He pointed to a dark manway. I used my lighter again. The manway dead-ended about ten feet in. A bundle of clothes seemed to be propped against the back wall.

I turned to say something to the wino. He was gone.

I went into the manway. It was Artie, all right, and somebody had done a first class job of marking him up. Knowing Artie, it was probably several somebodies.

He was just coming around. He looked, one-eyed, at the light, then up at my face.

"Oh, hullo, Mack," he said.

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"So this is the guy who could look out for himself?" I said.

"Don't jump to no hasty conclusions, Mack," Artie said, "until you sec the other guys."

"Let's get out of here," I said. I helped him to his feet and steered him to the Lincoln. We got in, after Sue unlocked for us, and I fired up and gunned out of there.

After acknowledging the introduction to Sue, Artie explained how he happened to get beaten up. He'd gone back into the bar, deliberately, to create a diversion for me. He thought if he started a ruckus in the front end it would distract attention from what I was doing in the rear.

"All right," I said, "but you might have been killed."

"Who, me?" he said. "I can take care of myself."

As I tooled the Lincoln back along our previous route, I filled them in on what had happened with Valeda and liver-puss.

"Jesus," Artie said. "Uh—excuse me ma'm."

"How horrible," Sue said. "And to think I started all this."

"Forget it," I said.

"What do we do now?" Artie said.

"First, I have to make a couple of phone calls." I pulled into a filling station that had an outside phone booth. "You got any change, Artie?"

He fumbled in his pockets. "I'm clean," he said. "Them s.o.b's. musta rolled me. Excuse me, ma'm."

I got some change from the filling station attendant. I called the Tampa police and told them to go to El Tejon and find a couple of dead guys. Next, I called Harry Grant's number. When he answered, I hung up.

The last call was to Anne's apartment. She answered after three rings.

"Hello Anne," I said.

She gasped. "Mack! No it couldn't be."

"You sound surprised," I said.

"I am—I was, love," she said. "I'd about given you up. It's

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late, you know." Then she laughed. "But it's not *too* late. You are coming to keep our date?"

"I'll be there in about an hour," I said. "Did everything go all right at the track?"

"Doyle was furious—but I'll tell you all about it when you get here."

"You ever locate the boss?"

"No. I can't understand it."

"I'm beginning to," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll explain when I see you," I said.

I hung up.

In the twenty minutes it took to drive to Harry Grant's cottage, I did a lot of thinking. Things were adding up. I knew, now, who had tipped Valeda about Sue Farmer. I knew, in short, who Valeda's key employee was at Winter Downs—the one who had a bug on my office phone.

If I could prove it, I could still clear myself of the murder rap Doyle had hanging over me.

Hell, I *had* to prove it.

I braked the Lincoln in front of Harry's cottage.

"Wait for me," I told Sue and Artie. "I don't think this will take long."

Valeda's Astra made my pocket sag as I strode up the walk to Harry's door and punched the bell button. The door opened almost at once. The light from the living room fell across Harry's face. There was no slow smile this time.

"Come in, Mack," Harry said. "I've been sort of expecting you."

I looked past him at Hal Davies and Ralph Beauchamp. Both spoke to me. Both looked nervous. Or was it embarrassment?

"I've just come from Ybor City," I said. I looked at each one of them. None of them gave away a thing. "Both Valeda and his machete man are dead."

Harry reached for the arm of a nearby chair. Eased himself weakly into it. The other two let out long sighs.

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"You were our only hope, Mack," Harry said. "If we had come right out and told you what was going on, we'd have been dead."

"I know," I said. "The message was a little delayed reaching me, but I finally got it. Valeda himself unwittingly showed me when he told me Vargas had bungled by not compensating the pool totals with the altered payoff in that first race."

They all three nodded eagerly.

"I knew Vargas wouldn't know how to compensate the discrepancy if he recognized it. And I knew you fellows were too sharp to let a boo-boo like that get by you. So it finally hit me, you'd done it on purpose to tip me off."

"It was the only way we could figure to do it," Harry said, "and live."

"You damned near got me killed," I said. "I'm still tagged with the Vargas murder."

"We can talk now, Mack," Harry said. "We're ready to take our lumps. We'll do anything you say."

"All right," I said. "Here's the way we'll handle it. First we'll call Doyle and tell him to get over here on the double. Then you, Harry, will call Anne Skelly and tell her you've got me here and she'd better come right over."

"What if she isn't home?" Ralph said.

"She's home. I made sure of it. She's expecting me to show there within the next fifteen minutes. She knows by now that Valeda and El Puerco are dead. She's waiting for me, all right."

"Then why don't we just go and get her?" Hal Davies said. "Or tip Doyle off so he can get her?"

"Because I want Doyle to hear it from her," I said, "and with the right scenery. I want all the way off the hook. I want off tonight. I got a date."

Doyle, Sue and Artie, were in the bedroom when Anne finally arrived.

To all intents and purposes, I was tied in a straight chair

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in the middle of the living room, with Harry, Hal and Ralph supposedly standing guard.

Anne was still beautiful as she stood just inside the closed door looking at me. But her beauty was marred now by the hardness I'd seen once before in her face and eyes.

"You're a fool, Mack Gaul," she said. "I tried hard to get you to tumble for me. You could have had me and more money than you ever dreamed of once I had you softened up. But you had to get smart. Now you're going to disappear. That should satisfy that stupid Doyle on the Vargas killing. You skip, see? You run out. You're guilty."

"It's no good, Anne," I said. "You must know Valeda is dead. You've lost your syndicate connection. There's no profit in it for you anymore. I know that you ordered Vargas's death—and Sue Farmer's kidnaping. What can you hope to gain by getting rid of me?"

"I'm not through, lover boy," she said. "I've still got my mutuel men. We'll start over, and this time there'll be no bungling Vargas to spoil things. There's still millions to be made, and little Anne is going to make them. You won't be around to stop me. And neither will that auburn-haired amateur bitch of yours. It's all tied up in a neat little package, and no syndicate to take the hog share of the profits."

"I'll take that neat little package," Doyle said as he stepped out from the bedroom.

"One more thing, Anne," I said. "What have you done with J. Worthington Badger?"

She squirmed defiantly in Doyle's grasp. "Full of love, and alcohol, and knockout drops," she said. "He's at my apartment, sleeping it off, the poor dope."

It was much later when I took Sue home, after loading up on thick, medium-rare steaks.

"I almost forgot," she said. "What about the forty cents?"

"I've got that figured out, too," I said. "Each Florida

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race meeting donates two days proceeds to the State Scholarship Fund. This year, the Winter Downs donation will be about four thousand dollars heavier than usual."

She smiled at me and my spine felt like a run in a stocking.

"You're priceless, Mack Gaul," she said.

She made it sound like she really thought I was.

"What about that nice Mr. Grant?" Sue said. "And the other two?"

"If they're late for work tomorrow, I'll fire 'em."